ブレイブルー3 コンティニュアムシフト〈上〉

原案・監修：森利道
（アークシステムワークス）
著：駒尾真子

ドラゴンブック

ドラゴンブック
ふ-1
3-3

BLAZBLUE—ブレイブルー—3
コンティニュアムシフト〈上〉

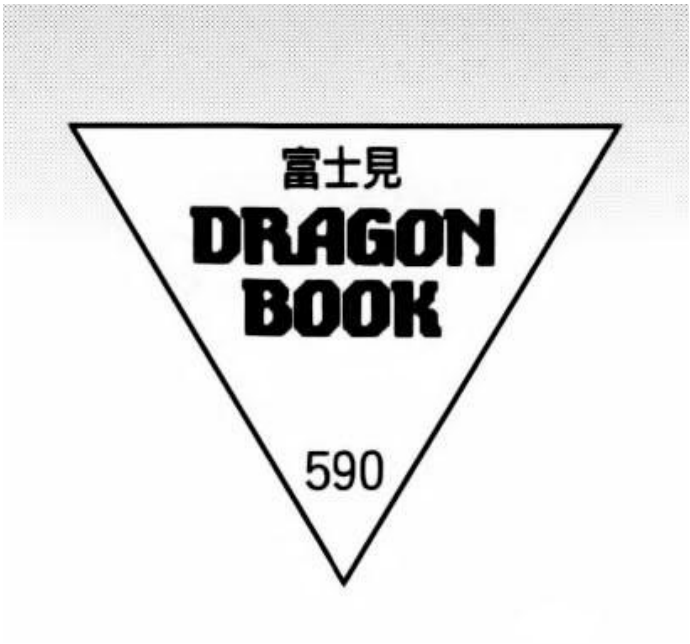
原案・監修：森利道
著：駒尾真子

富士見書房

"Wake up, Λ-No. 11"

“Are you okay, Ragna?”
“Meow!”
“Woohoo, don’t cry and stand up!”

"I'm hungry. Treat me to a meal!" the girl said with the boldness of a fearless puppy.



BLAZBLUE-Blazblue 3

Continuum Shift (Part 1)

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Prologue

A certain day, a certain month, 2197 - 4:35 AM

The war between the Novus Orbis Librarium, which governs the entire world, and the Ikaruga Federation, which dissented from its methods and seceded, commonly known as the "Ikaruga Civil War," lasted for six years.

Although the war situation was initially balanced, the difference in military strength gradually became apparent, and the Ikaruga Federation's defeat became more certain with each passing day.

However, wondering where and how to end it, the flames of war dragged on, as if hesitant to find a place to put an end to it. As a result, six years later, the war finally came to an end with the fall of the Ikaruga Federation's base and the slaying of its leader.

Approximately two months after the end of the civil war.

Ikaruga, still submerged in muddy chaos, was experiencing a quiet night.

A night dominated by thick darkness, with the moon and stars hidden by thick clouds. In a certain place in Ikaruga, there was a moving shadow.

It was underground in Ibukido, the fifth Hierarchical City, a particularly devastated area in Ikaruga.

No, it was no longer a city, but a wasteland scattered with rubble.

Two years before the end of the civil war, Ibukido was blown away without a trace by a large-scale explosion at an underground research facility. All that remains now is the trace of a greatly eroded and collapsed mountain, and the miserable ruins of the Hierarchical City that was built along the mountain.

Without a barrier created by Ars Magus, the surrounding area is filled with seithr, an environment where humans and creatures cannot live peacefully. If an ordinary person were to spend time in such a place, it would have a significant impact on their mind and body within a few days.

In such a deserted wasteland, where even the sound of small animals' footsteps could not be heard, the moving shadow steadily advanced into the depths, overcoming or removing the rubble of the collapsed underground facility.

"…This is Tager. Arrived near the destination," the shadow muttered to the void, scattering small noises.

The shadow was in the shape of a person. However, its body was clearly larger than that of a standard human. Excessively raised shoulders, log-like arms, a thick body, and legs sufficient to support them.

The moving rock-like figure easily lifted the collapsed ceiling blocking the way forward and removed it to an edge that wouldn't obstruct passage.

Beyond that was a passageway. It was the passageway of the laboratory where the explosion occurred two years ago. It must have been built in a cellar rather than the city streets, as it retained remnants of its former appearance despite the explosion occurring nearby.

Metal flooring and cold walls of the same material. It seemed that electricity was being supplied pointlessly from somewhere, and the emergency lights installed at his feet were irregularly flashing a bluish-white light.

The passageway curved gently and continued into the depths. The unreliable light at his feet illuminated the powerful intruder who proceeded into the depths without hesitation.

The owner of the extraordinary giant body was a man. But his skin was much redder than any human could have.

His name was TR-0009 Tager. He was a cyborg belonging to a research institute called Sector Seven.

"…I've heard about it, but this is…"

As he exited the passageway, Tager let out a low voice at the sight that spread before him. It was a large room. It must have been a more open space before, but it was not unscathed, and the entire room was about to collapse.

According to the data, there should have been a high dome-shaped ceiling, but it was broken by the bedrock and sand that had fallen from above, and the wreckage was scattered everywhere. The walls were also destroyed by the earth and sand that had rushed in from somewhere, and metal lumps that looked like some kind of measuring instrument were buried inside.

However, the room was still large enough to be described as spacious.

The cause was a huge device that was stuck deep in the back of the room and tilted.

The device, modeled after a stake or a great sword, supported the ceiling and the room with its overwhelming size. Thanks to this, the room was not completely swallowed by the collapse.

The room was filled with dim light. Like the passageway, the emergency lights were lit by the remaining power, but that was not the main light source.

Countless black lumps scattered throughout the room. Their surfaces glowed faintly blue, slowly faded… and then glowed again. The gentle flickering, reminiscent of the pulse of life, allowed the entire room to be seen through.

"…It's like a graveyard." The red-clad giant muttered sadly.

The black lumps were all box-shaped, and their designs were reminiscent of coffins. The light they emitted was weak, like the last assertion of a fading life. Some had their lids open or broken. They spilled a strange, luminous, viscous liquid and were silent.

Why that liquid was stored in the coffins, what that liquid originally was—Tager had been told, but refrained from thinking about it deeply. What he needed to do now was not to sympathize with the contents of the boxes, but to complete the mission quickly.

Weaving through the scattered coffins, Tager began searching the room. He had no use for coffins that showed no reaction or were broken and spilling their contents. What he needed were intact ones, ones with contents remaining. Among those, ones in particularly good condition.

"Kokonoe."

Within a useless coffin, there was something that remained without a scratch. After brushing away the accumulated dust, the characters "DIMENSION INVIOLABILITY CONTACT BODY No. 11" appeared from underneath.

It was placed a little apart from the other coffins, as if it had been pushed away. Miraculously, it had not been crushed by the rubble, and its solitary presence made it seem as if it had been forgotten by everything, even the explosion.

He put his hands on it and tried to lift it. There was a solid weight inside. A small noise answered the voice that called out to the other side of the communicator.

"Check the contents." It was a woman's voice that left no room for argument.

"Understood." The gigantic cyborg lifted the lid of the coffin with his large hands, which could crush a human head. The lid of the coffin was heavy, but it opened smoothly without any creaking resistance.

However, Tager, who peered inside, furrowed his brow, which had maintained its composure until then.

"Th-this is..."

The contents of the coffin were a single young girl.

A small body. Slender and delicate, lying there without strength. She was completely naked, exposing her lifeless pale skin without anything to hide it.

Her disheveled golden hair was long, and the eyelashes that framed her downcast eyes were also golden. If she were breathing and opened her eyelids, she would surely reveal an adorable face. But more than her well-formed features, it was her body that drew attention.

Her body was terribly damaged.

Her legs, which should have been stretched out limply, were missing below the knees, and the damaged surfaces, which could not be called cleanly severed, were hideously crushed.

One of her arms was severed halfway up the bicep. There were traces of careful treatment, but that treatment was done to remove tissue so damaged it could not be regenerated. Originally, something unbearable to look at, which had lost its function as an arm, must have been attached there.

Her emaciated face was covered with burn-like marks, and her skin, which would have originally been transparently white, was now dark and painfully stained. Her remaining torso also had scars where something seemed to have pierced it, and some of the wounds were festering and horribly damaged.

"The damage is severe. But we can repair it here." An inorganic voice came through the static of the communicator. "What's her number? There's a mark on her chest. Check it." Her chest. Just below the collarbone. There was indeed a pattern and numbers engraved like a tattoo, whether it was a mark or a number.

"...Eleven. There was nothing in better condition in the other coffins." He probably didn't need to check anything else. Deciding so, he closed the lid of the coffin while answering the communicator. He firmly secured the lid so that the girl's mutilated body would not be further damaged.

"Twelve and thirteen have already been recovered, huh? We're too late, as expected." The voice in his ear murmured. It was hard to tell if it was a soliloquy or addressed to him.

"...Kokonoe. What is this?" While hoisting the coffin onto his boulder-like back, Tager interrupted her musings with a question. He expected to be ignored if it was an unnecessary question. But the answer from the ear communicator came back without hesitation.

"It's an insurance policy for anti-Observer weaponry." She didn't give a clear or specific answer. But that was always the case. After all, she was the only one who really knew what was needed and why. "That's enough. Return." Her curt instruction made it clear she had no intention of explaining further.

Tager put his hand to his ear and responded as calmly as possible.

"Understood. Returning now."

In the deep, crumbling underground graveyard, he turned his back on the coffins that flickered blue, asserting their presence. Following the coldly lit emergency lights, the oni-like man carrying a coffin retraced his steps.

He didn't yet know what the person on the other side of the communicator would do with the contents of this coffin. He didn't know what they intended to create. But that was not something for this giant cyborg to think about. Much less was it something the girl in the coffin could think about.

As the giant figure carrying the coffin disappeared from Ibukido, Ikaruga slowly welcomed the morning.

Chapter 1: Wheel turns — A New Gear

0

I've been waiting all this time. I've been longing all this time. I've been dreaming all this time.

From inside this narrow box, from inside this painful water, from inside these cold gazes... about that person who will surely save me.

That person probably doesn't know me. That person probably doesn't notice me. That person probably doesn't even know I'm here.

But... I want to see them.

I just want to see them.

In a dimly lit room, where the lamps of numerous monitors and devices served as makeshift lighting, a large cylindrical device was placed. The device, connected by countless cords, had a thick glass surface, and the inside was filled with a cool blue liquid. A lone girl floated within the liquid, releasing tiny bubbles.

She was a petite and slender girl. Her slightly faded, long golden hair reached down to her feet.

Her body was covered in a skin-tight black suit. No part of her translucent white skin was visible except for her head. ...The wing-like pattern and the number "eleven" engraved on her chest were also hidden beneath the black suit.

-Ah... I...

In the blue water, the girl's lips moved slightly.

It was too subtle, too weak, and too fleeting to be called a movement. However, it was a definite "action" recorded as a weak reaction on the instruments connected to the device where she slept.

...I want...

Small bubbles overflowed from the corner of her lips and rose. Her faded, bloodless, thin lips were muttering.

She was dreaming. She no longer knew when it had started, but the same dream continued endlessly. It was a solitary dream where only she existed. But in it, she always thought of a certain man. The only "him" left in her fading memories and consciousness.

It was like an illusion she had created to escape endless pain and fear. But it was a dream. It was a dream. It would eventually end, but while she was dreaming, she could live in a temporary reality.

...I want...

The more her lips moved humanly, the more her consciousness rose from her muddy sleep.

She didn't feel any anxiety about the dream ending. She couldn't feel anything anymore.

When she was first brought here, her body was more damaged than anyone could imagine now. But her body had been repaired by complex procedures and a special culture medium, her legs and arms had grown supple to her fingertips, and the countless marks on her face and body had disappeared.

The person who repaired her body and gave her new legs stood in front of the cylindrical device.

She was also a slender person. However, instead of a black suit, she wore a white coat-like garment, and her long hair was pink. Between her neatly tied hair, small triangular ears like those of a cat, the same color as her hair, peeked out.

"…That’s a good enough response for awakening," the white-coated person with cat-like ears muttered in a low female voice, still chewing on a lollipop-like candy. At the same time, her cat's tail, split into two at the end, swayed thoughtfully behind her back.

Reaching for the instruments beside her, she fiddled with a few switches.

"Can you hear my voice?" she asked, directing a sharp gaze at the cylinder filled with blue liquid and calling out to the girl inside. With a small sound, the bubbles grew slightly larger. The instruments clearly indicated a reaction. "The preparations are complete. I’m going to activate you."

The consciousness of the girl sleeping in the water slowly stirred, as if being pulled up by the low female voice. There was no will to resist.

The dream was over.

So, in the culture fluid that resembled her dream, she thought for the last time.

I want to see you.

"Wake up... Lambda-No.11-"

In response to the cold voice of the scientist-like woman in the white coat, the girl slowly blinked her red eyes.

1

Slowly blinking her red eyes, the girl sighed wearily.

Her white fingertips combed and brushed away her golden thread-like hair, which was tied in twin ponytails with large, upright ribbons. Her detached and weary demeanor was evident in her gestures and gaze.

She was a girl dressed in a lavish black dress adorned with plenty of frills. Although she had a young appearance of about twelve or thirteen years old, her elegant gestures and her gaze, which mixed thoughtfulness far removed from her youth, told the story of her having lived through many times more than her appearance suggested.

Not just many times more. She—Rachel Alucard—had repeatedly observed the hundred years that repeated over and over. She had continued to observe in this form for what felt like eternity.

She stood with a truly bored expression in a pure white space with nothing around her. There were no walls to demarcate how far it continued, nor was there a floor or ceiling to define the space above or below. The air had no temperature, nor was there wind enough to rustle. It was just a vaguely empty, white place.

There, three chairs were placed to surround Rachel.

"Rachel Alucard."

A mechanical and haughty voice called out from one of the chairs. There was no one there, but shadows of the chairs and the people sitting in them stretched out in the white space, even though there was no light source anywhere.

The sitting figures had extremely simple outlines, so simple that it was impossible to tell whether the shadow's owner was male or female. However, the voice addressing Rachel was a stiff male voice.

"I ask again. Why did you activate the Phase-Type Restraint Mechanism Tsukuyomi Unit?"

Casting a sidelong glance at the empty chair with only a shadow stretching from it, Rachel narrowed her eyes with an air of complete boredom and replied.

"That's none of your business."

A concise refusal.

To Rachel's cold words, another chair and shadow spoke.

"No. We demand an explanation. If it is determined that there was a valid reason, we must reconsider our perception of 'that man.'"

The second voice was an obligatory, mechanical female voice.

Next, the third chair opened its mouth in the shadow of its profile.

"Your choice is incomprehensible in the first place. It's not rational. The man you defended with your life was certainly the 'origin' of the world, but not the 'convergence point.' Yet you casually played your trump card... It's completely unlike you."

In contrast to the previous shadow, the shadow that rebuked her had an emotional, sarcastic, and androgynous voice, and spread its previously folded arms as if to show its exasperation. Of course, the gesture was only performed by the shadow, and there was still no physical body to lift the arms.

Rachel lightly shrugged her small shoulders toward the androgynous voice.

"Those are unwelcome words. What do you know about me?"

"We know almost everything. Rachel Alucard. We observe all past events. Including you, who were involved in those events..." The male voice reproached her heavily.

"Based on that, we cannot observe any value in 'Ragna the Bloodedge,' whom you are overly concerned about. We were under the impression that you fully understood the significance and importance of the Tsukuyomi Unit..."

"Yes. Compared to those, we cannot determine that 'Ragna the Bloodedge' has sufficient value."

"If it were the 'Susanoo Unit,' we would understand a little better," the male voice said, followed by the female voice, followed by the androgynous voice, each directing their words.

Rachel surveyed the incorporeal shadows with a bewitching smile tinged with a slight sense of superiority.

"...Perhaps you will never understand."

Even if they continued to observe the same time by repeating the world countless times, even if they continued to watch over history for hundreds of years to come. Thinking so, she felt a little smug.

The androgynous voice shook the head of the shadow sitting in the chair.

"Well, whatever. Your events are yours. The fact that you refuse to explain is also within our expectations. We just accept and choose the events that occur."

"Choose," he says. That was comical, and Rachel turned her smile into a sneer.

"You're telling me amusing nonsense.... Do you think you've become 'god' or something?"

If a being chooses the way the world should be, then they would surpass even those who surpassed human intelligence, becoming a "god."

But they deny it.

"No. We, Takamagahara, are a system created by humans. We cannot become 'god.'" And even a god, once observed by someone to be a god, ceases to be a god. Because by then, what was 'god' is merely a 'form,' something recognized by someone based on their subjectivity.

"...But that's the same for the Master Unit. And of course, for Noel Vermillion, the successor of the Azure, and for you, Rachel Alucard, the peripheral factor."

To the male voice that spoke as if to thrust it upon her, Rachel returned with a slightly sharp and stern voice.

"I don't need you to tell me that."

Rachel was well aware that she was far from being a god. She felt it deeply. She was made to realize it.

But what about the three shadows here? In Rachel's heart, as she loosely clenched her fingertips, such a small question arose and disappeared, deemed unimportant.

From atop the empty chair, the shadow spoke in a thick male voice.

"Our role, the Takamagahara System, is to continue to observe and construct the world. No matter how the Tsukuyomi Unit changes the shape of the world and history progresses... all of it remains under our observation."

"You may foolishly believe that the world is undergoing a transformation, but I must say, you are mistaken. The world has not changed at all."

"Yes. The world constructed by Takamagahara is always accurate. Even if distortions occur due to the Master Unit's interference, they are processed as possibilities within 'probabilistic events,' and Takamagahara's reconstruction proceeds as planned."

An unseen voice echoes and fills the pure white space.

They are the Takamagahara System.

A program created to manage the world, modeled after the Master Unit, an entity akin to a god discovered by humanity in the deepest part of the Boundary, and designed to bring its power and system under human control.

These arrogant shadows have tirelessly continued their endless century of repetitions. And they believe they can perfectly manage the long and short time of the world that is about to begin, just as they have managed the past century.

And Rachel cannot deny this outright. The Takamagahara System is akin to a heart to her.

However.

"Since I've been so kindly invited, may I offer you a word of advice?" Rachel placed a white fingertip to her lips, her small mouth curving into a smile.

They and I are very similar beings. Beings outside the elements that construct the world. However, what we see is slightly different. That’s what Rachel thinks.

"Humans are not as simple as you think. Though, you wouldn't understand even if I told you."

For example, even if they know and recognize the reason why the world escaped its repeating history, they don't seem to understand what led to it.

"...Rachel Alucard. No matter how you act, the world will be guided by us." The man's dignified voice spoke again from unseen lips. "The world will return to Azure, and all life will return to Azure as well."

Rachel frowned at the man's voice, which seemed to announce a predetermined fate.

Quite an enigmatic way of speaking. Do they intend to end everything and start again from scratch?

Even if Rachel asked, they probably wouldn't answer.

"...Don't assume things will go as you expect. Above all," Rachel's tone turned ominous. This time, it was not advice, but a warning. A warning directed not only at the Takamagahara before her, but also at herself. "You have released that man."

Having said her piece, Rachel disappeared from the white space, accompanied by a wind carrying the scent of roses.

2

January 1, 2200 – 9:10

Novus Orbis Librarium Iwasu Branch.

A man walked down a meticulously managed corridor with white walls and evenly spaced, magic-powered lights. Though it was still early morning, there were no guards in sight. The long, straight corridor was enveloped in silence.

The man's appearance was peculiar at first glance. He wore a long cloak over a wide opening, gloves covering his fingertips, boots covering his feet, and a mask that completely hid his eyes. Only the lower half of his face and his head were exposed, but even from that, it was clear he was a man of considerable age. His steps were unhurried, and he exuded a natural air of composure, though not consciously.

As he approached his destination, an office, he passed a young girl who had just emerged from it. The girl had red hair. She was young, likely only a few years out of military school. She wore the poncho and hat issued as the standard uniform, but its color was pristine white, not the blue worn by ordinary soldiers.

The Zero Squadron. White designated a unit assigned to special missions within the Novus Orbis Librarium, commonly known as the "NOL."

Of the two who passed, only the masked man turned his head.

The girl, her long hair swaying behind her, pressed her lips tightly and walked forward with steps as if nothing were in her eyes.

However, the man was not particularly interested in the girl. After a momentary glance, he immediately returned his gaze forward and, with the same pace, opened the door to the office from which the girl had just emerged.

His entry was as casual as if he were entering his own room. He was greeted by another man leaning against the desk in the office.

"You should at least knock. It's adult manners, Colonel Relius Clover," the man said mockingly without a hint of surprise, and sighed with a wry smile.

He was a tall, slender man wearing a black suit instead of a guard uniform. Despite being indoors, his facial expression was obscured by the shadow of his deeply worn hat and his long bangs, just like the masked man. However, the wry smile on his lips was somewhat sneering, and it could hardly be called a pleasant smile.

The masked man called Relius—Colonel Relius Clover of the Novus Orbis Librarium—addressed the man in the black suit, Captain Hazama, who also belonged to the Novus Orbis Librarium and worked in the Intelligence Department, without any reproach for his rude remark.

"Hazama. Was the soldier who just left... Tsubaki Yayoi, if I remember correctly?" He brushed aside the sarcasm and complaints as if they didn't exist and asked unilaterally. Hazama, seeing this reaction from Relius, his superior in rank, shrugged.

"You still don't listen to people, do you?" As if he hadn't even heard the exasperated grumble, Relius casually closed the office door and turned his attention to the standard interior layout of the office.

It wasn't that he pretended not to hear; he simply didn't hear. For this masked man, words that weren't worth listening to didn't exist.

Hazama, who knew this from experience—yes, from a very long experience—gave up on further teasing and answered, tapping the edge of the desk with his fingertip.

"Yes, that's right. Tsubaki Yayoi, the esteemed daughter of the Yayoi family of the Duodecim. I was just conveying the imperial order to her. You know, about that trip to Kagutsuchi." He paused, adding a hint of meaning, and then Hazama placed his hand on his hat. His gaze was unclear, hidden by the shadow of the hat and his bangs. But the masked man could see that his eyes were gleaming ominously beneath.

"Kukuku... Poor her. After finally surviving, she's being sent to Kagutsuchi after all. And to kill her best friend!" With his hat still pressed down, Hazama's shoulders shook with uncontrollable laughter.

His demeanor was quite different from the nonchalant cynic he had been a moment ago. The aura that had seemed to lurk in the shadows was now painted with a cruelty that seemed to calculate when to bare its fangs and bite its prey's throat. The corners of his mouth, twisted into a deep, strained smile, resembled a snake licking its lips before its prey.

"Ah, what a farce. It's hilarious, really, heheh. But it's about time we made that trash woman useful. It's easy to handle her, but if you take your eyes off Tsubaki-chan for a moment, she dies over some trivial thing."

Shaking his head with an expression of annoyance, as if he were tired of taking care of her, Hazama—or rather, Yuuki Terumi, who had taken control of his body—chuckled.

It would seem like a bizarre sight to an outsider. However, Relius, who had moved to the desk and was casually browsing the documents placed on it, turned his masked gaze to Terumi and spoke without much emotion.

"It seems the fusion with the vessel wasn't perfect."

Terumi's smile vanished at those words. Though his eyes couldn't be seen, hidden in the shadow of his hat, his lips clearly twisted into a frown, indicating displeasure.

"Tch... so you saw right through it after all. That’s no fun," Terumi clicked his tongue in annoyance.

"I prepared that vessel. I can tell the condition of something I made just by looking at it."

Without bothering to give Terumi a thorough examination, Relius tossed the documents he was holding back onto the desk, seemingly uninterested.

"...It's the effect of that magic, as expected. The 'forced bindings' remaining in your soul are hindering the fusion."

"I know that without you having to tell me..." With a low resentment that seemed to crawl up from the depths of his stomach, Terumi's voice became hoarse. "Seriously, give me a break with that damn witch. To put such a persistent curse on me, she really is the genius witch Nine of the Six Heroes."

Nine, one of the Six Heroes. She developed the Ars Magus formulas that became humanity's weapon in the Dark War against the Black Beast, and created the trump card weapons, the "Nox Nyctores." She herself defeated the Black Beast by wielding her extraordinary and overwhelming magical power.

Spitting her name out onto the floor in disgust, Terumi slumped onto the edge of the desk with a languid gesture and loosened his necktie in annoyance.

"Well, what's done is done. It's just a bit of discomfort, it doesn't hinder me... More importantly, it's Kagutsuchi now." Terumi grinned again, a distorted smile.

The Thirteenth Hierarchical City of Kagutsuchi. There, the "Eye" that controls the world exists. Not just left and right, but up, down, high, and low, as one pleases. What is observed, what is recognized, becomes the truth. The power that harbors the "Azure." Thanks to it, Terumi was able to regain his vessel. Thanks to Noel Vermillion, who recognized the existence of "Terumi" with that eye.

"...To think that the Twelfth would inherit the Azure. That was unexpected," Relius muttered in a low voice, as if talking to himself.

Terumi's lips twisted into a sarcastic smile at those words.

"Oh? Oh, really? 'Unexpected'? That's a surprising word coming from you, Relius. Didn't you just say you know everything about what you create? Huh?"

He thrust his chin out provocatively and peered at the golden masked man, but Relius, unimpressed, returned a blank silence without even a flicker of expression.

"You're not interested? Don't ignore me, damn it."

His rough, irritated words were in vain against this masked man.

"Well, anyway, we can finally start now. I have to thank the failure." As a sign of gratitude, he'd have to treat her very carefully.

Behind Terumi, who was grinning with an ominous, scheming face, an electronic sound suddenly rang out rudely. It was a communication.

Terumi lifted his black hat slightly, glanced at the switch of the communicator with a look of annoyance, then put his hat back on and pressed the green flashing button.

"Yes, yes, what is it?" He answered the communicator in the voice of Hazama from the Intelligence Department.

What he heard was a report from the Thirteenth Hierarchical City of Kagutsuchi. It was a message from the Ars Magus ship stationed at the Fifth Port, one of Kagutsuchi's sky gateways, announcing the completion of their mission.

"Ah, you found him? That's good... Oh, seriously injured? That's not good. Yes, please take good care of him. Oh, and you don't need to lock the room. He's a severely injured patient, and I'm sure he understands the gravity of the situation," Terumi said, his voice lilting with intonation.

Hazama tapped the desk next to the communicator. His deeply cut smile barely restrained his amusement.

"Besides... the 'Major' was hailed as a hero in the previous Ikaruga Civil War. Even though he's suspected of treason, locking him up like a prisoner... well, you know?" Hazama said soothingly, and the guard on the other end of the line acknowledged him, as if prompted. Hazama chuckled lightly. It was easy. "Then, please take care of him."

With that friendly farewell, Hazama released the switch as if letting go of a toy and ended the call. He then raised his index finger and turned to Relius.

"Major Jin Kisaragi has been captured in Kagutsuchi, it seems. What terrible timing. I just arranged a lovely welcome for him," he said. However, he had expected this. Everything was proceeding according to plan.

Hazama slid off the desk and picked up the stack of documents that Relius had been glancing at.

"Well then, I'll be heading to Kagutsuchi with the welcoming party for Major Kisaragi. Although it's still a few hours before departure... there are various preparations to be made, so I'd like to take my leave. Is that alright?"

"About that," Relius turned to Hazama. Or rather, Terumi. For Relius, they were the same. The core remained unchanged.

"I'll accompany you to Kagutsuchi. I want to see the Twelfth Prime Field Device with my own eyes."

"Oh, how rare," Hazama looked surprised. This time, it wasn't an act; he was genuinely surprised. For Relius to go to such a distant place as Kagutsuchi...

"You're certainly welcome, Colonel Relius. Well then... see you later!" With a theatrical bow, Hazama began preparing for his departure, starting by asking Relius to leave the room.

3

I wonder how old I was when I learned that my house had a basement. I knew it existed from a very young age, but I didn't learn what kind of place it was or what was inside until I entered the Novus Orbis Librarium's military academy.

My father told me that various items passed down through our family were carefully stored there. Among them, he said, were special weapons used on the front lines in the Dark War

about a hundred years ago, when humanity fought for its survival against the suddenly appearing giant monster, the "Black Beast."

Midday, as the sun gradually rose higher.

Tsubaki Yayoi, a female soldier who had been summoned to the Iwasu Branch of the NOL early in the morning, went straight to the basement, which she had only heard about, as soon as she returned home.

The hallway she walked through was floored with wood, and a large, open courtyard was visible beside it. The spacious garden was meticulously maintained, and neatly trimmed plants grew thick green leaves.

Without even glancing at the peaceful view of her home's garden, Tsubaki hurried forward. Her sky-blue eyes, as if firmly determined, saw only her destination. Her long, glossy camellia red hair bounced and swayed on her white poncho as she walked briskly.

Even though she had never been there, she knew where the stairs to the basement were. In the back of the mansion, in a secluded spot where guests never ventured, behind a locked door. In her hand, she already held an old key with a heavy texture.

Normally, she would need permission from her father, the head of the family. But now, every second counted.

Departure was in a few hours. The destination was the 13th Hierarchical City, Kagutsuchi. By then, all necessary preparations must be completed.

Tsubaki's footsteps turned down the hallway, approaching the door to the basement. As she moved away from the courtyard, where sunlight no longer reached, the surroundings suddenly darkened.

Just a few steps from the closed door. At that moment, a presence suddenly moved behind Tsubaki.

"Izayoi?" The presence abruptly called out. The suddenness of it made Tsubaki gasp and turn around.

Standing there was a familiar figure. A person she knew well, someone she had respected since childhood... Tsubaki's father.

"Father..."

Clutching the key in her hand, Tsubaki looked weakly at her father.

Tsubaki had always been weak to her father. He had always been strict, yet he had raised his only daughter with more kindness than anyone else. And more than anything, he was the one who carried the world and society of the Yayoi family on his shoulders.

He was staring at Tsubaki with a sterner expression than usual. His gaze was not seeking an answer, but rather conveyed something more, something... significant.

"I heard from above. You're heading to Kagutsuchi by imperial decree, aren't you?" The current head of the Yayoi family spoke bitterly, a deep frown etched between his troubled brows. He had worked under the NOL for many years. Therefore, he knew well what kind of unit Tsubaki's white uniform represented.

White signified the Cold Division. The Zero Squadron, also known as the "Wings of Judgment," consisted of those who judged soldiers who committed acts of rebellion within the NOL.

To judge soldiers sometimes meant resorting to force for punishment. Hence, much of the work carried out by these Judges in white uniforms was... assassination.

It was clear to her father, without needing to ask, what kind of mission Tsubaki was being sent to Kagutsuchi for.

"Are you really going to use Izayoi?" At her father's question, Tsubaki nodded firmly.

"Yes. I need... the power to carry out this mission. As I am now..." I wouldn't stand a chance. The people she would face as a "Wing of Judgment," as a Judge of soldiers, were far stronger and more skilled in combat than Tsubaki.

"For the Imperator, for the Librarium?"

"Yes." Tsubaki nodded once more. It was the duty of a soldier of the Novus Orbis Librarium to undertake any mission, even at the risk of their life.

Above all, I am a daughter of the Yayoi family. The members of the Duodecim must live as role models for others. Tsubaki believes that this is what it means to be born into the Duodecim, especially the Yayoi family, which has built its current status with its high individual abilities. Of course, her father must feel the same way.

"Father. I am aware that Izayoi is dangerous. But I can't fail this mission. This is an important mission for me, one that I can't entrust to anyone else." Tsubaki straightened her back, raised her chin, and looked up at her father with a resolute expression. There was no falsehood in her words. These were her true feelings.

Yes, she couldn't entrust it to anyone else. The voice she had just heard echoed in Tsubaki's mind, a voice she had firmly resolved.

The man from the Ministry of Imperial Affairs, conveying the imperial decree, with his suspicious atmosphere and shocking words, "Please assassinate the traitors Major Jin Kisaragi and Lieutenant Noel Vermillion."

One was a figure she had looked up to like an older brother since childhood, and the other was her best friend with whom she had shared all kinds of happy memories during her military training days.

(I can't believe those two are traitors. There must be some misunderstanding or circumstances.)

But the truth isn't what matters now. What matters is the fact that there is an order to eliminate them as traitors.

If Tsubaki is deemed unsuitable for this mission, a replacement "Wing of Judgment" will be sent. In that case, those two lives will be targeted without Tsubaki knowing.

She couldn't let that happen. She couldn't entrust the lives and fates of those important to her to someone else's blade.

After gazing into Tsubaki's eyes for a moment, her father unfolded his arms and stepped forward. He closed the distance to Tsubaki's face and placed his hand on the door of the basement as if to encourage her.

"…Carry out your duty admirably."

With those words, Tsubaki's father turned and left the hallway.

It seemed there was much more he wanted to say. But he swallowed those words and allowed her to use the key to the basement and what lay within.

Tsubaki bowed deeply to her father as he turned the corner and disappeared down the hallway. Then, she turned to face the door at the end of the hallway once more. The few steps to the door felt slightly heavier and colder than the ones she had taken before.

She had said those words to her father. There was no turning back. The resolve she had solidified on her way here had become even stronger, piercing deep into Tsubaki's heart.

Standing before the door, she inserted the key into the sturdy black iron keyhole. The key turned quickly. The door opened quickly. However, what lay beyond was a long spiral staircase that seemed to sink into darkness, and reaching the basement was not immediate.

However, what lay beyond was a long spiral staircase that seemed to sink into darkness, and it wasn't possible to reach the basement.

As she held her hand over the patterns engraved on the wall, the Ars Magus lighting installed along the wall of the long staircase leading to the basement lit up one after another. Unlike the hallway, the stone staircase leading to the basement gently repeated low steps, continuing downward. As she took a step inside, hard, cold sounds echoed off the walls and low ceiling.

Although it was well-maintained and not dusty, the cold air unique to the basement wafted up from below.

Taking a deep breath of that air, as if to replace the outside air, Tsubaki began to descend the stairs.

(…Such a long staircase. I never knew it was like this.)

It was her first time going to the basement, and her first time stepping onto this staircase.

The evenly spaced steps gradually created the illusion of walking in circles, while at the same time giving her the sensation of being swallowed by something vast and incomprehensible.

As she descended the stairs, Tsubaki thought about the two people she had to pursue. Could she find out why they were called traitors? If there was a reason, could she prove their innocence and have the harsh punishment Tsubaki had to carry out revoked or lessened?

But what if… what if they really were traitors? In that case...

(I will judge them with my own hands... both Noel and Brother Jin.)

Betrayal of the NOL is something that can never be forgiven.

(Brother Jin...)

He was from the Kisaragi family, one of the Duodecim like her. He was always calm and intellectual, and she had always followed his lead.

Unconsciously pressing her chest with her hand, Tsubaki moved her legs rhythmically. Then, memories from her childhood surfaced in her mind, like pumice stones floating up from underwater.

They were precious memories she would never forget. So precious that the scenes would appear behind her eyelids when she closed her eyes... The scenes in those memories seemed to blur, bringing tears to her eyes... Tsubaki's precious memories—

It was an incident from March, many years ago.

The Yayoi family, where Tsubaki was born, was one of the Duodecim that had long supported the NOL.

The heads of the Duodecim had a custom of gathering once a month at the house corresponding to that month. For example, the Mutsuki family in January, the Kisaragi family in February, and the Yayoi family in March.

As the only daughter of the family head, Tsubaki, who was raised overprotectively, like a doll in a box, had been taken by her father to visit the houses where the meetings were held since she was young. Because she was an innocent little girl, she was especially fawned over and welcomed by the adult women wherever she went.

Tsubaki didn't dislike the meeting days when she went out with her father. Rather, she was happy to be introduced as her father's proud daughter. But there was only one thing she was dissatisfied with: there were no children her age in any of the houses she visited.

There were many people who brought their children like her father, but they were closer to the adults than Tsubaki, and they wouldn't play with her because they sat with their parents at the meeting.

So, Tsubaki was well-behaved and smiled before and after the meetings, but during the meetings, she had no choice but to play quietly alone in the corner of the mansion to pass the time.

On this day, when the March meeting of the heads of the families was held at the Yayoi family, Tsubaki's birthplace, Tsubaki was playing alone with her favorite ball in the courtyard.

"Twelve, thirteen, fourteen... Ah!" The ball suddenly slipped from her hand and rolled away. Bouncing lightly once, the ball escaped from Tsubaki's hand and rolled as if being drawn in, eventually stopping near the veranda that opened wide to the courtyard.

There was a figure silently looking down at the ball.

"Ah..." Tsubaki, who had chased after the ball, stopped, her voice filled with surprise.

Looking down at the ball was a boy. He was about the same age as Tsubaki, but a little taller. He had beautiful golden hair, which sparkled in the afternoon sun shining diagonally.

Noticing the small voice, the boy raised his face slightly and glanced at Tsubaki, who was standing in bewilderment. His clear green eyes quietly captured Tsubaki. He was a boy she didn't know. She had accompanied her father to the heads' meetings many times, but she had never seen such a boy.

Who was he? Tsubaki was confused and flustered because it was her first time meeting a boy her age. While she was hesitating, the boy bent down and picked up the fallen ball.

"…Here." With a mature tone, the boy handed her the ball. Contrary to his somewhat cold gaze, his awkward voice was surprisingly soft. Feeling the tension naturally drain from her cheeks, Tsubaki ran to the boy.

"Um, thank you." When she thanked him with a smile, the boy looked troubled and returned the ball to Tsubaki's hand. Tsubaki hugged the ball to her chest and spoke up, forgetting all about her nervousness. "Who are you? I'm Tsubaki."

Tsubaki looked up straight at the boy's eyes, which were much closer than the adults she usually looked up to, with a slight blush on her cheeks. She rarely had the opportunity to talk to someone so close in age. So, although she was surprised by his sudden appearance, she was happy to be able to talk to him.

The blonde boy frowned for a moment, as if he was perplexed, but soon returned to his calm expression and opened his mouth.

"Tsubaki... you're the daughter of the Yayoi family?"

It was more of a bland soliloquy than a question directed at Tsubaki, but Tsubaki, thinking that the boy had returned her words, became even more excited.

"Yes, that's right. And you? You're not from the Yayoi family, are you?"

"I'm... Jin Kisaragi. I'm from the Kisaragi family."

"Uncle Kisaragi's? But I've never seen you before." Tsubaki blinked and tilted her head. She had been to the Kisaragi family several times and had greeted the current head of the family and his children. But she had never seen this boy, Jin, even when she visited last month.

"That's none of your business." The boy named Jin looked away and continued with a sigh. "The Kisaragi family has many children... it's not surprising that you haven't met me."

Indeed, as Jin said, the current head of the Kisaragi family had many children, while Tsubaki's father had only one daughter. Tsubaki knew of at least three.

But come to think of it, none of the Kisaragi children Tsubaki had met were there today. While vaguely recalling such things, Tsubaki became even more interested in the boy in front of her.

"Why are you here, Jin? Are you alone too?"

"I was just brought here to greet them as a candidate for the next head of the family. I came out after that was finished. I shouldn't disturb the lords' discussion."

"The lords...? A candidate for the head?"

Even though they were about the same age, Jin used many difficult words. Tsubaki blinked, tilting her head in confusion. Jin frowned again, looking troubled.

"If you don't understand, it's fine. ...And, Tsubaki, was it?" His voice was curt, but he called her name. Happy about that, Tsubaki's expression brightened. Jin made a slightly stern face and crossed his arms. "You're younger than me, aren't you? Use honorifics with your elders."

As if to emphasize that he was older, Jin raised his chin slightly and deliberately looked down at Tsubaki. The difference in height was only a few centimeters. There was no one around Tsubaki she could stand next to and talk to at such a close distance.

Tsubaki tilted her head again.

"Older...? Are you my older brother, Jin?"

"No, I'm not exactly your brother..."

"Well, then! Can I... call you 'older brother'?" Interrupting Jin's words, Tsubaki's voice was filled with joy.

She thought it was wonderful. Because he was a little older than her, and although he seemed grown-up, he wasn't so far removed from her age. And besides... he was a little cool. She had dreamed of having such an older brother.

It wasn't that Tsubaki didn't have any siblings. It was just that the bloodline, heavily and closely guarded by the Yayoi family's tradition of valuing lineage, had resulted in many with weak constitutions. By the time Tsubaki, who was unusually healthy, was born, illness had taken the siblings she should have had.

Unaware of such matters, Tsubaki, who simply longed for the idea of siblings, hugged her ball tightly to her chest and looked up at Jin.

Faced with Tsubaki's sparkling eyes filled with expectation, Jin hesitated, his lips wavering, before letting out a sigh. He answered gruffly, as if giving up.

"...Do as you like."

At Jin's permission, Tsubaki clapped her small hands and jumped up and down.

"Yay! Older brother Jin! Older brother Jin!" She was so happy, she repeated it over and over.

It was a mysterious word. Just saying it out loud made her feel strangely encouraged. It was a special word that made her feel like she wasn't alone.

"Hey, Jin, please be my older brother forever, okay? Promise?"

"...Okay. I promise."

"Then, um... can we do a pinky promise?"

"What's that?"

"Jin, you don't know what a pinky promise is?" After saying that, Tsubaki realized and pressed her hand to her mouth as if to stop herself. Then she started again with the same words. "Jin, you don't know what a pinky promise is?"

"Use honorifics with your elders. Be polite to your older brother."

"Then I'll teach you!"

With a big smile, Tsubaki took Jin's hand, extended his pinky, and intertwined it with her own. They lightly gripped each other's hands, except for their pinkies.

"Pinky promise, if you lie, you'll swallow a thousand needles."

"Pinky promise!"

"Haaa..."

With the remnants of a childish promise clinging to her little finger, Tsubaki stopped. The stairs to the basement ended there. What awaited her was an old, heavy-looking door. She took out the key her father had authorized her to use and opened the door. The basement, as expected, had no windows and was filled with darkness.

Tsubaki took one of the Ars Magus lights at the end of the stairs and, using it as a lamp, stepped inside. Step by step, she moved towards the back of the room, drawing light through the darkness.

Without even glancing at the various items passed down through generations in the basement, Tsubaki headed for a small door, about one meter square, embedded in the cold stone wall. It was a wooden door, much older than the entrance to the basement.

At first glance, it seemed sturdy, but the surface of the wooden door was engraved with some kind of pattern. It was a sealing pattern. It was sealed with Ars Magus and alchemy, an ancient technique, so that only a direct descendant of the Yayoi family could open it.

The method of opening it was simple. Tsubaki took out the small knife tucked into her chest and, pulling it out of its sheath, placed the dull white blade against her fingertip. She gritted her teeth tightly and slid the tip.

Enduring the pain of the skin tearing, Tsubaki hunched her shoulders and grimaced. The small wound immediately welled up with red blood, forming a small red bead on her fingertip. As the red bead gathered and ran down the pad of her wounded thumb, Tsubaki touched the patterned wooden door, pressing her red, wet fingertip against it.

Instantly, the blood on Tsubaki's fingertip disappeared as if it had been absorbed into the wooden door. Then, the engraved pattern glowed pink and wriggled like the pulse of a living creature. The change in the pattern ended quickly. When Tsubaki gently pulled her hand away, the wooden door creaked open in response.

Inside was a box-like vault. Inside the box, which was also surrounded by wood like the door, was a carefully folded costume. It was a white garment trimmed with gold. On top of it sat a hat that seemed to match the design of the costume. The hat, with wing-like decorations on both sides, exuded a strange presence, as if it were the guardian of this box or this costume.

Tsubaki reached out both hands and lifted the white garment, hat and all. The solid weight reminded her not of the softness of a dress, but of the hardness of armor.

Pulling it out of the box into the lamplight, Tsubaki gazed at the costume she had just taken out with a serious expression.

"This is... the 'Sealed Armament: Izayoi'."

It seemed to be an armament with Ars Magus passed down in the Yayoi family from ancient times. It's said that in the past, during the Dark War, a member of the Yayoi family wore it and fought.

Its power was said to be able to harm even those who are not human. If this strange costume held such power...

(...Can I fight too?)

Like falling petals, Tsubaki murmured in her heart.

(Can I... protect something too?)

The vivid memory of March, when Jin protected her, a lonely child, from sorrow with a resigned expression.

"Brother Jin... Noel..."

Please, let them both be safe. And let the suspicions against them be unfounded.

With a prayer-like thought, Tsubaki left the underground warehouse, the white armament in her hands.

Having finished her preparations, she had to arrive at Iwasu's Ars Magus ship port thirty minutes before the departure time.

The mission details and information on the two suspects were to be given to her by a man named Hazama, a captain from the Intelligence Department, on the Ars Magus ship bound for Kagutsuchi.

4

January 1, 2200 - 9:43

Thirteenth Hierarchical City of Kagutsuchi, Middle Layer.

Ragna the Bloodedge plunged his head into the water overflowing from the faucet, washing away the sand and dust that soiled his white hair. The flowing water was occasionally dyed red with blood mixed in with the dirt, flowing into the drain.

His appearance was a terrible sight.

Although the black clothes covering his sturdy body were not noticeable due to their dark color, they were stained with dirt, dust, and a large amount of blood, which had dried and clung heavily. The long red jacket he wore over them was also torn and damaged in places, clearly showing that he had been involved in some kind of violent incident.

Ragna's beloved sword was leaning against the water faucet, which was gushing out clear water. It had been washed with water to remove the rough dirt, but numerous scratches remained on its heavy, wide blade.

The lingering traces of blood and conflict were completely out of place with the lush, peaceful scenery around him.

"Cold..."

Twisting the valve of the faucet to turn the water off, Ragna shook his head, scattering droplets from his wet hair.

This was a park in the middle layer of Kagutsuchi. Various trees, large and small, were planted, and a gently curving promenade ran through them. Unusually for a Hierarchical City built by stacking plate-shaped city districts in multiple layers, the middle layer received ample sunlight. Even when looking up, the upper layer's ground was far away, and the clear blue sky was clearly visible.

After looking up at the sky once, Ragna roughly scratched his hair with his thick gloves, which were getting wet, and then abruptly turned around.

With his strange eyes, the right one red and the left one green, he looked at a bench placed at the edge of the promenade. On the simple white bench sat a small figure of a girl.

Although she was a girl, she was not a small child. However, she lacked the composure and maturity to be described as an adult woman. With her delicate build, she also had a somewhat childlike aura.

Her name was Noel Vermillion. She was a soldier belonging to the Fourth Thaumaturgist Squadron of the Novus Orbis Librarium, with the rank of second lieutenant. The blue and white uniform she wore was the uniform of the NOL's soldiers, indicating her special position.

However, for a soldier of the NOL, the governing body of the world, Noel seemed too lost, clutching her blue hat, which matched her uniform, on her lap and wandering her gaze.

It was no wonder. A few hours ago, she saved Ragna, who had almost lost his life deep underground in Kagutsuchi, and was caught in an explosion without fully understanding the situation. Then she was buried in rubble and barely crawled out into the sunlight just a few minutes ago.

Without any specific topic to talk about, they continued walking in search of a place to rest, finally reaching this park a while ago.

There hadn't been any proper conversation yet. Just as Noel was awkwardly troubled by the atmosphere, Ragna was also awkward, roughly scratching his wet hair.

"So...?"

"Huh?" Noel lightly jumped on the bench, as if she didn't expect to be spoken to. She was like a small animal. Ragna couldn't help but let out an exasperated sigh.

"'Huh?' Don't give me that. How long do you intend to follow me like this? You're not going to say you're arresting me again, are you?"

Noel said she was going to arrest Ragna right after crawling out of the pile of rubble.

As a soldier of the NOL, she had the responsibility to maintain public order and the authority to crack down on criminals. On the other hand, Ragna was an SS-class criminal who had attacked and destroyed NOL branches all over the world. It's no wonder Noel, upon learning Ragna's identity, was driven by a sense of duty to arrest him, even in her confusion.

But Ragna didn't understand why she followed him to the park even after that incident was vaguely brushed aside.

"I-It's not that I intend to arrest you..." Noel lowered her eyebrows weakly, awkwardly choosing her words.

As a soldier, saying she didn't intend to arrest a wanted criminal right in front of her was questionable. Ragna tilted his head, but refrained from saying anything, feeling it would only cause further confusion to the golden-haired little animal.

Looking up at Ragna as if peeking at him, Noel hesitantly asked.

"Um... what are you going to do, Ragna? From now on?"

"Me? I don't have any plans. But I can't just wander around the city center. I'd be beaten to a pulp if I went now." Speaking in a grumbling tone, Ragna turned his face towards the city center.

Early this morning, a large-scale explosion occurred deep underground in Kagutsuchi. It was the explosion that Ragna and Noel were caught in. The explosion caused enormous damage to the city of Kagutsuchi, especially the lower layer.

It seemed that the culprit who caused the explosion was the wanted criminal Ragna the Bloodedge.

The source of the rumor was unclear, but from what he saw and heard on the way to the park, everyone was indignant about the explosion and its perpetrator, Ragna. If he were to show his face and be recognized as "Ragna the Bloodedge," it would be extremely troublesome.

Moreover, he couldn't deny the rumor loudly, as he wasn't completely uninvolved in the explosion. He couldn't act too brazenly.

"Well, I've accomplished my purpose in Kagutsuchi. I guess I'll go outside for now and hide."

And while waiting for the rumors about the Kagutsuchi explosion to subside, he would have to gather information. Information about "Yuuki Terumi," the one who was the enemy of his family, whose existence he had finally confirmed.

"Hide... by yourself?" A casual question was thrown from the bench. Not understanding the meaning of the question for a moment, Ragna stopped his movement of returning his sword.

"Huh?"

"No, it's not that I mean anything deep... I was just wondering if you have a family or a home to return to, Ragna."

That's none of your business. Ragna immediately thought so. Of course, he doesn't have any. Why would she ask such a thing? And in a tone as if she were just a regular, ordinary girl having a casual conversation, not a soldier.

(This is throwing me off...)

He couldn't tell if he was with a soldier of the NOL or not. Not knowing how to take this situation, Ragna roughly scratched his head, trying to shake off the distracting noise that was disturbing his thoughts.

"It's none of your business. Are you trying to interrogate me or something? Are you kidding? Give me a break."

"N-No, that's not it! It's not about interrogation or anything like that..."

Overwhelmed by her own momentum, Noel stood up from the bench. She gripped her hat so tightly that its rounded design was completely distorted. But without caring about that, Noel raised her chin as if she had made up her mind and looked straight at Ragna.

Her eyes were a clear green, matching the color of the surrounding leaves. But perhaps due to her lack of confidence, her slender eyebrows were lowered to the fullest.

"I... I wanted to talk to you a little more, Ragna. I wanted to know a little more about you. So... um..." Noel's words faltered again, unsure of how to continue and conclude. Her gaze wandered left and right, then back up to Ragna, but words wouldn't come out, and she became flustered.

Ragna was slightly taken aback by Noel's expression. Was it what they call déjà vu? An overlapping image of his sister Saya, who was taken away from him in the distant past.

His sister in his memory has a still childish face. But that image and Noel's face looking up at him... overlapped so much that he felt dizzy.

(Why... like this...)

Unconsciously, Ragna put his hand to his head, as if enduring a headache.

Why were they so similar? Why did he remember his sister so much? He didn't even know her face or existence until yesterday, their meeting was completely accidental, and she was just a soldier.

As if turning away from the lingering fragments of the past swirling in his brain, Ragna lowered his hand, which had turned into a fist, and made an exasperated face, exaggeratedly dropping his shoulders.

"Are you stupid? Why would a soldier from the NOL and a wanted criminal be talking all friendly in a place like this? It's unthinkable."

Why was he still taking this soldier around with him in the first place? He should have shaken her off and left Kagutsuchi alone as soon as possible. He should have known that right after crawling out onto the ground.

This female soldier was not his sister. Her name was Noel, and she was a different person.

"But I!" Noel strengthened her voice as if pleading. "I..."

But immediately, her voice lost its strength and faded.

He could see that she was desperately trying to sort out her faltering thoughts, wanting to say something. Her hands were still tightly gripping her hat, and the long golden hair that was usually tucked inside the hat slightly stirred every time Noel moved her gaze or head.

She was the type of person whose face and attitude revealed what she was thinking and feeling, to the point where it made those watching her worry.

Ragna added another layer of exasperation, as if grumbling. This was really throwing him off. If he continued to be deceived by the lukewarm sunlight and talked a little more with the small animal-like girl, he might... want to talk a little more.

Realizing that he was vaguely feeling that way, and also noticing another pressing situation, Ragna suddenly sharpened his gaze.

"Noel, right? You." Lowering his voice, Ragna frowned and glared at Noel. Annoying. He spoke with a clear tone of displeasure. "Sorry, but I have no intention of getting friendly with the NOL. I don't even want to talk to you. You're seriously annoying. Can you go somewhere else now?"

"E-Eh... Ragna...?" Blinking her big eyes, Noel's voice cracked.

Ragna's words had been curt from the beginning, but she felt that the temperature had suddenly changed. Did she say something wrong? She couldn't find any words that seemed to be a

mistake, and her confusion robbed her of the words to ask Ragna why. Ragna spoke to Noel as if spitting out heavy discomfort.

"Don't call me that so casually. Get the hell out of here. Don't get involved with me."

Noel shrank back at the sudden pressure. Instantly, she thought, "I..."

Not logically, but instinctively, she trembled with fear.

"S-Such... a way of speaking..."

"Leave! I won't warn you again." Ragna bared his fangs, which gleamed evilly, and growled. Both his left eye, which held the green of the evergreens, and his right eye, which held the red of blood, glared at Noel with disdain.

Noel staggered back a step. Her mind couldn't keep up with the situation. She just felt overwhelmingly sad. Clutching the hat she had been holding to cheer herself up, she bit her lip to hold back the rising emotions.

"I... understand. I thought I could get to know you, but... I didn't think you were so cold! Excuse me!" Too sad to be indignant, Noel turned her back on Ragna and ran. She left the park and entered the street leading to the city center without looking back.

She probably thought that she wouldn't encounter Ragna again, since he avoids crowded places. Or perhaps she chose the first street she saw to put as much distance as possible between herself and Ragna. Ragna didn't care either way. It was all the same to him. For now, he was just relieved that Noel had disappeared.

"Now..."

After the slender figure in the blue and white uniform completely disappeared around the corner and even the sound of her running footsteps faded away, Ragna firmly gripped his beloved sword, which he hadn't bothered to return to his waist, and turned around.

"What do you want, kid?" He called out in a defiant tone towards a quiet corner of the park.

It seemed as if no one was there. But after a moment, a figure hidden in the blind spot behind the trees and bushes stepped out onto the lawn.

It was a well-dressed boy. He wore expensive-looking clothes, large round glasses on his face, and a silk hat that seemed to match the color of his clothes. His honey blonde hair was soft, and his large blue eyes gave the boy an impression of good upbringing. But the eerie thing standing behind him shattered that refined appearance.

Behind the still youthful boy was probably a doll. But it wasn't the kind of doll a child would hug. It was clearly taller than Ragna, and its face was embedded with an inorganic, expressionless look. It had a feminine silhouette and wore a purple dress-like outfit, but its overly long dangling arms and the stake-like claws at the end of them erased any feminine beauty. It was clearly a tool for fighting.

"Ah, you noticed. As expected." Stepping onto the promenade, the boy in the silk hat and round glasses smiled innocently at Ragna. "Ragna the Bloodedge, the 'Grim Reaper'."

However, in the blue eyes that flickered behind the round glasses, there was a sharp, unsettling presence that didn't seem to belong to a child.

Chapter 2: Recollection Dream — The Children Are Dreaming

1

January 1, 2200, 11:12

Noel quickly passed through the middle layer's urban area, where residences and shops were mixed together, heading with indignant steps towards the Ars Magus lift located at the end of the tree-lined street.

This area was apparently still outside the shadow of the upper layer, and the soft midday sunlight illuminated Noel and her surroundings. But Noel's expression as she walked through it was not as gentle as the sunlight.

(What... what? He didn't have to say it like that. He didn't have to glare like that!)

Clenching both hands tightly into fists and twisting her mouth into a straight line, Noel vented her dissatisfaction inwardly as she walked with unusual anger.

The golden hair that had been flowing down her back was gathered up and stuffed into her hat, which was somewhat distorted from being gripped too tightly. But strands of hair that had escaped from her bangs and the hat bounced and swayed every time Noel stamped her feet roughly.

(It's true that I'm a soldier, and he's a heinous criminal, a wanted fugitive, and the highest-priced bounty head in history. It might not make sense, it might be presumptuous to have a friendly chat in the park. But...)

It's not that she's angry. It's not that she's irritated or disgusted. It's just...

(I just wanted to know a little more about him...)

Ragna the Bloodedge. His white hair was stained with blood and dust, and his bright red jacket was also dirty and tattered. When he raised his voice loudly, the tips of his sharp fangs peeked out, and he was a little scary when she first saw him.

But sometimes, he showed a kind smile. With his strangely colored eyes, one red and one green, he showed a soft expression that made her relax. That moment felt like being protected by a great force... and it felt very, very nostalgic.

(What was I expecting? Did I think we could become friends?)

Her feet, which should have been hurrying forward, moved slowly like a scolded child. She naturally looked down, her gaze falling.

There were no elements for a friendly relationship in the first place. Their fundamentally conflicting positions were fundamentally incompatible.

She knew that. She understood in her head that it was perfectly natural. But her subconscious mind held such sweet expectations probably because he resembled someone.

The boy with dazzling golden hair and kind green eyes she saw in her dreams. The "brother" she called in her dreams.

(No, what am I thinking so selfishly?)

Noel shook her head lightly, trying to shake off her sentimental thoughts.

It was a dream. Noel had no brother, and even if she did, it was probably something from her lost memories. What was the point of bringing it up now and indulging in sentimentality?

But...

That person... Ragna the Bloodedge, saved her. Even though he was wounded, much more severely than Noel, he jumped in and protected her, throwing his body like a shield.

He stayed by her side, just like the "brother" who stroked her head in her dreams.

(Oh man, again... I have to think about something else. I can't think about Ragna right now...)

If she didn't try not to think about him, nothing else would enter her head.

Noel shook her head once more, this time vigorously, desperately trying to change her thoughts. There were many other things she had to think about.

For example... yes, about last night.

It might be early this morning for anyone else, but Noel was thinking about the strange device she saw deep underground in the NOL's branch and the girl she confronted there. Although she had never seen the girl before, her face was surprisingly similar to Noel's.

Then there was Hazama from the Intelligence Department, who accompanied Noel to Kagutsuchi. Last night, he suddenly transformed into a different person in the basement of the branch, calling himself Yuuki Terumi. It was as if another person had entered the body of Hazama...

"Ugh..."

It's disgusting. Noel pressed her throbbing, heavy head. Why? Her consciousness faltered when she tries to remember Hazama. This shouldn't have happened until yesterday.

(What on earth... happened there? What did I... see?)

She didn't know. More and more things she didn't understand were piling up.

(Come to think of it, I... don't know anything.)

She didn't know what happened underground, about herself, or about Ragna. Anxiety was welling up in her now. When Ragna was with her, she didn't even think about anxiety.

"Let's go."

Muttering as if telling herself, Noel half-forcibly took a step forward.

Anyway, she would try to go to the upper layer and the magic ship port. She had to contact headquarters somehow. She had to ask for instructions on what to do next.

While telling herself what to do in the future in a businesslike manner, Noel returned her sluggish pace to a brisk walk.

But just as her feet were about to pass through a narrow alley, a voice called out from the alley.

"Second Lieutenant Noel Vermillion, Fourth Thaumaturgist Squadron... right?"

"Eh..."

The voice belonged to a woman. Reflexively stopping, Noel's arm was grabbed by a hand that reached out from the alley and pulled her into the shadows.

"Kya!"

"Shh. Be quiet. I don't intend to harm you." The person who pulled her arm silenced Noel, who was instinctively twisting her body against the forceful pull, by raising her index finger.

A black poncho and a black hat. It was the NOL soldier's uniform indicating that she belonged to the Intelligence Department.

The person in the black uniform quickly confirmed that there were no other people around and released Noel's hand with a sigh of relief.

"Good, I finally found you." Throwing away the tension until then surprisingly easily, the Intelligence Department woman breathed a sigh of relief and turned to Noel.

It was then that Noel finally realized who was in front of her. The voice, the tone, and above all, the thick, large brown tail visible under the black poncho.

"Eh? Could it be, Makoto!!" While calling out in surprise, Noel pointed at the black uniform figure with disbelief.

Shaking her shoulders and laughing as if amused by Noel's reaction, she shook the fluffy squirrel tail under her poncho and removed the hat she had been wearing low on her head.

"Heh heh... you got it~. Oh, Noel, you're terrible, you definitely thought I was someone suspicious, didn't you?"

Winking mischievously, it was none other than Noel's best friend from military school, Makoto Nanaya.

Her warm, deep brown hair was cut short for easy movement, and her brown eyes were almond-shaped. Although it was difficult to tell from the poncho, her body was trained to a level that no ordinary man could match, and her voluptuous body line, which no ordinary woman could match, could be seen even through the poncho.

Most distinctive were the small squirrel ears that sprouted on her head and the large squirrel tail that had been asserting its presence under her poncho.

Makoto was a squirrel-type beastkin, not a human. The squirrel tail waved and swayed teasingly at Noel, who was blinking in confusion at the sudden situation.

"B-But I never thought it would be Makoto... eh, wait? Why? Why are you here, Makoto?"

Noel wandered her hands aimlessly in the air in confusion, looking at her friend who shouldn't be here as if she couldn't believe her eyes. She was surprised. She was genuinely surprised.

During their time at the academy, they were always together, no matter what they did. But after graduation, when their respective assignments were decided, the number of times they met decreased drastically, and recently, they had no opportunity to talk slowly at all.

What kind of premonition could have made her imagine that they would meet in this way?

Makoto shrugged and gave a wry smile, twirling her hat, which matched her uniform, on the tip of her index finger.

"Why? Well... it's a mission?"

"But- but I didn't hear anything about you coming to Kagutsuchi!!"

"That's right. After all, I'm in the Intelligence Department, you know."

"Ah, ah, I see..."

The Intelligence Department is a special division within the NOL. Due to the nature of their activities, which mainly involve information gathering, the details of their missions are rarely leaked to the outside world.

That's something any soldier of the NOL understands. But Noel had completely forgotten about it. Perhaps because her friend from her school days appeared out of the blue, her mind seemed to have reverted to those days.

"You're really... Makoto, right?"

"Oh come on. Who else would I look like? Look, my charming tail is still as fluffy and puffy as ever."

When Noel asked anxiously, Makoto smiled cheerfully and showed her her long tail.

It was definitely Makoto. When she understood the reality, a torrent of nostalgia and joy rushed into Noel's chest.

"Makoto... Makoto, Makotooo! Waaaaah..."

Kicking off the ground lightly, Noel jumped on Makoto with force. She wrapped her slender arms around Makoto's slightly taller and sturdier body, hugging her tightly.

"Whoa. What's wrong, Noel?"

"Makoto... I wanted to see you... I wanted to see you so much!"

She didn't care about wearing a soldier's uniform now. Completely forgetting about it, Noel shed tears from the corners of her eyes. She had completely relaxed. Just like a string snapping.

Many things came to her mind. But at this moment, none of them mattered. Right now, she was just happy with the warmth in her arms, and she couldn't stop crying.

"Noel, you're such a crybaby. If that's the case, then me too!"

Knowing that Noel's shoulders were trembling as they clung to her, Makoto wrapped her arms around Noel and hugged her back. Weakly enough to not take her breath away, but strongly enough to not let her sobbing voice leak out.

Noel indulged in Makoto's warmth, which accepted her with the same brightness as in their student days, and cried a little more in Makoto's arms.

Noel didn't lean on Makoto for very long.

Eventually, Noel regained the minimum amount of composure, stopped crying, and wiped her eyes. Waiting for that, Makoto asked what had happened.

There was nothing Noel had to hide from Makoto. Noel answered honestly, as she was asked.

She made contact with Jin in the city of Kagutsuchi and fought with him. Jin's behavior at that time was strange.

The NOL branch was somehow deserted, and Ragna the Bloodedge appeared there. She followed him to the basement, saw a huge device, and met a mysterious girl who had the same face as her.

The strange things that happened to her during the battle with the girl. And how Ragna saved her from being killed.

Hazama's transformation, the underground explosion, and her escape and parting with Ragna.

It seemed it was true that talking to someone makes you feel better. Although she wasn't able to control her feelings as much as she had organized them, Noel was able to calm her confused feelings considerably.

Makoto listened to Noel's story with a serious face throughout. When Noel finished her explanation, she lightly touched her purple chin and nodded repeatedly as if confirming something to herself.

"I see... thanks for telling me, Noel. I'm sorry for asking you so many questions."

"No, I have to report the same kind of thing to headquarters anyway. I'm glad I was able to talk to Makoto first." Thanks to that, she wouldn't have to hesitate in her words when reporting. Noel smiled wryly, imagining her usual self, who tended to stammer.

Makoto stared at that wry smile with a strong gaze. So strongly that Noel couldn't help but flinch.

"Noel. Can you postpone your report to headquarters?"

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"I want you to listen calmly. Okay?" Makoto lowered her voice as a heavy preface. "Tsubaki is heading to Kagutsuchi."

The name Tsubaki referred to only one person between Noel and Makoto. Tsubaki Yayoi. She was an irreplaceable and precious best friend to both Noel and Makoto. The three of them spent their military school days in the same room in the dormitory.

But Makoto's expression was not one of looking forward to a reunion with a nostalgic friend. Rather, it gave the opposite impression.

Makoto's hand, which was holding Noel's shoulder, put a little more strength into it.

"Of course, she's not coming to play. She's coming on her own mission."

Hearing the word "mission," Noel's body tensed. Tsubaki's mission. That is…

"Mission... 'Wings of Judgment'?"

Tsubaki belongs to the Zero Squadron, commonly known as "Wings of Judgment." The main role of the "Wings of Judgment" is to punish and condemn rebels and traitors to the NOL with a blade. Therefore, some people call the "Wings of Judgment" an assassin.

"But, why..." Noel's mouth moved and asked before she could think.

A dark shadow fell on Makoto's face.

Noel had a vague idea of the answer. Makoto had said earlier that she was looking for Noel. Makoto, trying not to avert her gaze from Noel, stated clearly, as if trying to convince herself.

"It's to eliminate Noel and Major Kisaragi as rebels who betrayed the NOL. Major Kisaragi's repeated violations of return orders and independent actions have been deemed acts of betrayal. In Noel's case, it's been said that she abandoned her mission to capture Major Kisaragi and is leaking information from the NOL by communicating with the SS-class criminal Ragna the Bloodedge..."

Noel couldn't say anything immediately to the words that were lined up. It was as if a shock like cold water had hit her from behind, and the words got stuck in her throat.

"That's- I didn't do anything like that!" The only thing she managed to squeeze out was a hoarse voice that didn't even serve as an excuse. But that was enough for Makoto. While keeping her

squirrel ears perked up and paying attention to the surrounding sounds, Makoto nodded with a stern look.

"I know. You want to say it's baseless, right? I think so too."

It was too soon after Noel's dispatch to Kagutsuchi to judge that she had abandoned her mission. Moreover, no evidence was presented to indicate abandonment of the mission.

Regarding the contact with Ragna the Bloodedge, according to Noel's story, there was indeed contact, but that was last night. Makoto found it difficult to come up with a plausible reason why she would leak information from the NOL in that situation.

"You wouldn't gain anything from leaking information from the NOL in the first place, right? Especially considering your parents."

Noel felt her heart leap at Makoto's indignation. That's right, there were her parents. The Vermillion couple, who took in the orphaned Noel and raised her as their own child, would they know that Noel is being treated as a traitor? Sensing her friend's feelings from Noel's pale face, Makoto hurriedly continued, realizing her slip of the tongue.

"Oh... sorry! I didn't mean to worry you. Don't worry, there shouldn't be any impact on your parents at the moment. They haven't even received a notice that you're a traitor. I've thoroughly investigated that, so rest assured."

"Y-Yes..."

Noel nodded, barely moving her powerless neck. It wasn't that she doubted Makoto's information-gathering ability. She had heard that Makoto's work as an intelligence officer was quite impressive.

Besides, Makoto, being more active than anyone else, would have investigated anything that concerned her. Although Noel didn't know much about Makoto after she joined the Intelligence Department, she could trust her straightforward way of speaking.

What worried her was something else.

"But that's... 'for the moment', right?" Noel voiced the anxiety that was spreading in her chest like a stain. Looking at her, Makoto bit her lip as if she had trouble speaking. But immediately, she opened her mouth without trying to deceive.

"I don't think it'll be immediately. But if you're captured as a rebel, we don't know what will happen. Even if you voluntarily surrender, I don't think they'll listen to your side of the story properly."

If Noel's defense was accepted, the "Wings of Judgment," responsible for assassination, wouldn't have been dispatched around Noel by now, but rather the Intelligence Department, which gathers information.

At Makoto's calm words, Noel pressed her clenched hands to her chest, unable to bear the swelling sense of crisis. Even if she was adopted, if Noel was charged with any crime, the Vermillion family would also be held responsible to some extent. The thought made her tremble with cold fear.

Makoto's hand gripped Noel's hand reassuringly. When she looked up, she saw Makoto's eyes staring straight at her. The gaze, which held the light of strong will, was the expression of her beloved friend who had always pulled her along.

"Don't worry. I'm here for you, Noel."

"Makoto..."

Although the words were simple, Makoto's encouragement resonated deeply within Noel. The trembling of her hands, which had been filled with anxiety, stopped as if nothing had happened.

"It's not just Noel. Tsubaki too, and Major Kisaragi too. I can't forgive them for hurting the people I care about with their selfish orders."

Makoto probably appeared before Noel on her own initiative. And without being instructed by anyone, she was telling Noel about Tsubaki and the Vermillion family. If she made a mistake, it would be a violation of orders, independent action like Jin.

Makoto, who knew the internal affairs of the NOL better than Noel, should have been well aware of the danger. Even so, she came, bringing with her a very simple and unprofessional personal feeling that she wouldn't allow her friends to be hurt.

"For now, Noel, I want you to hide."

While holding Noel's hand, Makoto quickly looked around. Even though it was a deserted alley, this was the middle layer. You never know when you might encounter someone related to the NOL. Fortunately, there were no suspicious signs or sounds in the vicinity yet, but Makoto's gradually increasing anxiety made Noel nervous.

"Hide? What do you mean? Are you saying I should run away from the NOL?" Noel asked quickly, feeling the lack of time in her skin. Makoto shook her head, her eyes filled with unusual tension and seriousness.

"For now, just disappear. If you're caught, we don't know if they'll listen to your side of the story properly. The NOL has been acting strange lately... they might even falsely accuse you of being a rebel."

The NOL has been acting strange. Noel stopped breathing for a moment, Makoto's words echoing heavily in her ears. What did Makoto see and what did she learn in the Intelligence Department? Sensing the unease that emanated from her words, Noel asked her friend to continue.

"But I don't think it's easy to make someone a rebel when you don't know their whereabouts, can't interrogate them, and have no evidence. At least we should be able to buy some time for us to take some kind of countermeasure. Besides..."

Makoto's explanation, which had been continuing in an agile and wise tone, suddenly lost its momentum and turned into a soft, wry smile. Her round, roasted almond-colored eyes peered into Noel's. A little sadly. But still gently.

"If you meet Tsubaki now... you'll be in trouble, right? She's serious, so she'll definitely try to follow her mission desperately. I think she'll try to... kill you."

Tsubaki is serious, a little stubborn, and very kind. She wouldn't be able to turn away from the mission given to her. But even if they hadn't seen each other for a long time, she wouldn't want to kill her best friend. She probably came to Kagutsuchi asking herself many times, with choices she couldn't choose from in both hands. But she would have to make a decision someday. Because she is... still very serious.

Remembering the face of her friend, who was always open to everything, with her red hair and blue eyes, Noel lowered her eyelids, as if withering.

"Okay. I'll do as you say. I don't want to fight Tsubaki either."

What would Tsubaki think when she confronted Noel? She would surely suffer. More than the intentions of the NOL or the crime of treason, she was worried that her friend's blue eyes would be clouded.

Makoto nodded once and released Noel's hand.

"I have a place to hide. There's a place called Orient Town in the lower layer of Kagutsuchi, and I want you to rely on a female doctor named Litchi Faye-Ling who lives there. I've already talked to her, so if you give her my name, she'll understand."

"What about you, Makoto?" From her tone, it seemed as if Noel had to find the female doctor alone. Makoto gave Noel, who asked with a questioning look, a stern expression.

"I have other things to do. And I have to meet Major Kisaragi and Tsubaki."

Makoto is the only one who can talk to Tsubaki properly now. If possible, she wanted to talk to Jin before he made contact with Tsubaki. She didn't want Tsubaki to turn her blade against Jin. That was a wish that Makoto and Noel shared.

"I'll go to Orient Town after I finish my errands, so let's meet at that doctor's clinic. I have various things in mind for what to do after that, but I'll tell you then." Saying that, Makoto turned on her heel, her black poncho billowing in the wind.

"Wait, Makoto!" Noel hurriedly stopped the shadow-like back that was about to run off. "Don't be reckless. I don't want my best friends to get hurt either."

At Noel's words, Makoto smiled, pulling back her lips. It was a reassuring smile. Strong, pushing her back.

"Okay, leave it to me. Well then, see you later!" Makoto said cheerfully as she turned the hem of her shadow-like poncho again and went out of the alley. She immediately entered another alley and melted into the shadows in an instant.

Without Noel knowing, Makoto had indeed become a soldier of the Intelligence Department. Her demeanor was much more solid than when she was a student. It was no longer the time when she was attending military school. Thinking so, she felt somewhat proud, and somewhat... as if she had discovered an empty part inside herself.

"I..." Noel clenched the hand that Makoto had been holding until just now.

How did she look to Makoto? How much had she changed from her student days, when she was always being pulled along by Makoto and Tsubaki?

She thought that she was still a weak person.

(At least I have to do what's in front of me properly.)

It would be inexcusable to Makoto, who ran all over Kagutsuchi to help her, and to Tsubaki, who must still be hurting, if she just looked down and faltered.

She, Noel Vermillion, was a friend of Makoto and Tsubaki.

Holding the fist where Makoto's warmth remained to her chest, Noel ran into the depths of the alley. She could no longer use the NOL's Ars Magus lift.

She had to find a way to Orient Town, avoiding people's eyes somehow.

2

On a promenade paved with brick-colored tiles, Ragna confronted the boy while basking in the sunlight filtering through the trees. A boy of school age, wearing fine clothes, a silk hat, and large round glasses.

The boy, who suddenly appeared and called Ragna "Grim Reaper," took a few steps forward beyond the patch of sunlight and gave a polite bow that matched his well-groomed appearance.

"Nice to meet you. My name is Carl Clover. I'm a 'vigilante,' believe it or not."

A "vigilante." A bounty hunter who captures or kills wanted criminals designated by the NOL, such as Ragna, to obtain money.

It's a brutal world of violence. It's hard to believe that a boy who looks like a scion of a good family is a "vigilante."

But Ragna understood.

Indeed, the boy, befitting the profession he revealed himself, faced Ragna, a much older man with an unsettling atmosphere, without even flinching, and looked at him with a challenging gaze.

"This is Ada Clover. My sister."

The vigilante boy, who called himself Carl, introduced the tall doll standing behind him. Its claws, lined up at the ends of its limp arms, gleamed in the sunlight.

"Sister?"

Although he didn't intend to ask, Ragna involuntarily voiced his question. The doll called "Ada" was clearly not human. Yet Carl, who was clearly human, called it "sister." With an attitude that seemed to say there was nothing unnatural about it.

It was eerie. Ragna frowned.

"You know this already, but I'll confirm it anyway. That thing isn't human. It's too much of a toy for a kid."

"That's rude, Ragna the Bloodedge." Carl said calmly, as if giving a wry smile. "There's a lot going on with my sister. But... I don't intend to explain it to you here, nor do I intend to make you understand. Above all, I didn't appear before you for that."

His fluent tone was calm and reminiscent of a gentleman's demeanor. But Ragna glared sharply at the boy.

While making a childlike expression, Carl was always looking for an opening in Ragna. Not a calculated opening to take advantage of him mentally. An opening to slash his throat with a hidden blade.

Besides... he felt like he had seen this boy somewhere. He felt like he knew why he appeared before him.

"You're aiming for the grimoire, aren't you?" Ragna said threateningly. His voice naturally mixed with disgust.

It was a rumor that had spread before he knew it. The "Grim Reaper" Ragna the Bloodedge possessed the strongest grimoire, the "Azure Grimoire." It was an undeniable fact, but there were many who, upon hearing the rumor, aimed for the grimoire itself rather than Ragna's body.

This boy was probably one of them. The thought made him feel disgusted.

"I appreciate your quick understanding. And since you say so, it means you have it. You have the BlazBlue... the 'Azure Grimoire'."

Carl's gaze suddenly flashed with a dull light of hostility, as if he were aiming at something. Maintaining a refined expression as if desperately trying to hide that dangerous light, Carl extended his immature hand, covered with white gloves, towards Ragna.

"Then, let me ask you again. Please hand your grimoire over to me."

His voice was gentle, and his tone was polite. But his gaze was still sharp, and even a hint of murderous intent flickered in the depths of his eyes. His mouth, which looked like a gentle smile, also seemed to be grinning ominously. Ragna laughed as if spitting out saliva at the malice that oozed from his entire body.

"Huh? 'Please'? Don't mock me. I refuse."

If he thought he could get it handed over so easily, then the "Grim Reaper" was being underestimated. Of course, Ragna was well aware that this boy didn't intend to do so. If he intended to settle this amicably, he wouldn't need such a dangerous aura.

"Please hand it over, I'm begging you." Carl still maintained his smiling expression and extended his hand. "Otherwise... I'll have to kill you."

As soon as he said this in an unchanged tone, the doll behind the boy acted. As if the heavy figure that had been silent until then was a lie, it slid forward and thrust its long arms straight

ahead. The arms suddenly extended in length, tearing through the air as if to pierce Ragna's head.

"Tch!"

Even though he knew it was coming, the doll's movement was faster than expected. Ragna reflexively twisted his body, barely dodging the doll's surprise attack. But the tip of a claw grazed him. A short tear ran across his left eye. At that moment, the wound, which was only a graze, burned with pain.

"Ugh... what... is this...?"

Ragna distorted his face and pressed his wound in unexpected pain. As expected, it didn't seem to be a big deal. With the power of the Azure Grimoire that the boy in front of him wanted, such a wound should heal immediately.

The Azure Grimoire had the annoying ability to absorb the life force of others around it and send it to its owner, Ragna.

But the wound didn't heal. Rather, the excessive pain annoyingly tormented him.

Ragna had an idea of what could give him such a wound. It was something he had just seen last night. His brother, Jin Kisaragi, who he encountered at the NOL's branch, also had it.

Nox Nyctores.

"This feeling... is that doll a phenomenon weapon?"

It was a weapon created by humans to defeat a powerful enemy, the Black Beast, in the Dark War a hundred years ago. It deeply interfered with the user's mind, giving them power beyond human intelligence. Enough power to kill the monster that drove humanity to the brink of extinction.

Ragna, using his sword, blocked the doll's other claws, which were swung up in a scooping motion from below, propelled by the recoil of its withdrawn arm. The impact of the blow momentarily numbed Ragna's arm. His footing faltered as if he'd been shoved, and Ragna quickly created some distance.

Looking up, Ragna saw the boy stepping out from behind the doll, which stood as if to shield him. With each step, his expression darkened, carrying a heavy and stagnant hostility, erasing the soft, fake smile.

"Nox Nyctores... Deus Machina: Nirvana? Yes, some people seem to call it that. But..."

The boy's feet tapped the tiles of the promenade. His small body jumped up and spun in the air, using that rotation to swing a rod-like weapon he'd pulled out from somewhere, horizontally towards Ragna's head.

"My sister isn't called that!"

"Whoa!?" He thought that only the doll could fight. His reaction was momentarily delayed by his carelessness, and Ragna blocked it with his arm. A dull sensation, and his arm twitched. Carl changed his posture in the air, using Ragna's arm as a support, and went behind him.

"Sister!"

At the young voice, the doll, Deus Machina: Nirvana, was already in front of Ragna. The large hands, with their gleaming claws, approached Ragna from both sides, as if to sandwich him. Ragna used his sword to forcefully deflect one of the arms.

"Don't screw with me!" He swung his sword and ran, cursing. He tried to go behind the doll, under Nirvana's arm, which had been thrown up high. On his back...

"Gah..."

For a moment, he didn't understand what had happened. His body wouldn't move. Then, his whole body was pierced.

He saw countless silver, needle-like things in his vision. They were protruding from Ragna's body.

Ragna turned his barely moving neck to confirm the rear. The needles were the doll's claws.

Following the escaping Ragna, Nirvana's claws were sharp and long, piercing Ragna's entire body from behind. He felt the needles passing through his body. And then, Ragna's body collapsed to the ground like a puppet with its strings cut.

"Ugh..."

He immediately tried to get up, propping himself up with his hand. But his body was strangely powerless. Could this be the power of the Nox Nyctores? The Azure Grimoire wouldn't heal his wounds.

Ragna clicked his tongue loudly and clenched his right hand tightly. This right hand, this right arm, was the Azure Grimoire. The grimoire, contrary to its name, didn't necessarily take the form of a book. The Azure Grimoire was an amorphous grimoire. It now had the shape and function of Ragna's right arm, hanging from Ragna's right shoulder.

"Is that your arm?" A young but intelligent voice said coldly in front of Ragna.

Ragna raised his face as if he had been shot. Then he tried to drag his body up. But before that, the boy raised his hand in his lifted vision. His hand was swung down as if giving a death sentence.

"Guh...!"

The next blow to his back was heavy and sharp, incomparable to the needle-like claws. He knew this without even turning around. The doll's arms, lined with stake-like claws, had pierced through Ragna's body as if pinning him to the ground.

The impact shattered bones, tore flesh, crushed internal organs, and sprayed a large amount of liquid.

The moment he felt it with an extreme sense of objectivity, Ragna—

—Case 21187. Inappropriate event detected. Starting phenomenon intervention.

The system is operating normally. Event reconstruction... 3... 2... 1...

...Occurrence of probabilistic event confirmed. Starting observation.

Carl kicked off the tiles of the promenade. His small body jumped up and spun in the air, using that rotation to swing a rod-like weapon he'd pulled out from somewhere, horizontally towards Ragna's head.

"My sister isn't called that!"

"Whoa!" He thought that only the doll could fight. His reaction was momentarily delayed by his carelessness, and Ragna blocked it with his arm. A dull sensation. His arm twitched.

At that moment, Ragna's eyes widened, and he gasped. A sense of unease ran chillingly up his spine.

(What is this...?)

Something was wrong. He didn't know what it was, but something was wrong.

A cloth fluttering in the air brushed his vision. It was a weapon that had been slammed down, different in color from the boy's cloak. A flagstaff, with the appearance of a toy and the mercilessness of a blunt weapon, was held in the mechanical hand peeking out from under Carl's cloak.

Using Ragna's arm, which had been struck by the flagstaff, as an axis, Carl jumped over the red-jacketed man and went behind him. At the same time, he called out.

"Sister!"

Before he knew it, the doll, Deus Machina: Nirvana, was in front of Ragna. The large hands, with their gleaming claws, approached Ragna from both sides, as if to sandwich him. Ragna deflected one of the arms with his sword, which he had swung with all his might, and used the recoil to kick the doll's torso.

"Don't screw with me!"

The words he spat out with the momentum were inexplicably unsettling and disgusting. Nirvana, which had been kicked away, slid backward in a posture that seemed to fold its body in two. The fingertips that swung widely were dragged back, failing to kill their prey and grazing Ragna's nose.

A chill ran down Ragna's neck. If he had been pierced by those claws, he wouldn't have escaped unscathed. Such an ominous thought crossed his mind.

(Tch... focus. I don't have time to think about unnecessary things.)

Ragna scolded himself and shook off the unease that was disturbing his concentration.

The air moved behind him. Ragna moved reflexively. He held his sword vertically and blocked something approaching him. After the sound of metal colliding exploded, he recognized that it was Carl's attack. What aimed at Ragna was a dull, glossy mechanical horse. Another strange contraption. He couldn't predict what would come out from where.

"My sister..." Carl glared sharply, holding down Ragna's sword and trying to crush it with the foot of the mechanical horse he had swung down. "My sister isn't called that. She's not a weapon! She's not a doll!! She's my sister, my sister, no matter what she looks like!"

As if climbing the stairs of passion, Carl's words became hot and resentful, and with each shout, the contraptions flew out wildly. To the right, to the left, they struck Ragna's sword, which was busy defending, with a harsh sound, and then suddenly broke the rhythm and swept his feet.

Even though he was shouting and furious, his movements were precise. He was aiming to kill Ragna precisely.

"Damn it!" Ragna had been bracing himself to counter Carl's flagstaff, but suddenly twisted his body and rolled on the ground. Immediately after that, the spot where Ragna had been standing was crushed like a biscuit by Nirvana's fist.

It was difficult. Ragna grimaced bitterly. The opponent was not one person, but one person and one entity. Nirvana, who had missed Ragna, stood in front of Carl with a natural movement. The boy, having forgotten his smile, fixed his gaze on Ragna with intense eyes.

"The 'Azure Grimoire'... with that, I can return my sister to her original form. I can return her..."

He didn't know if he was speaking to Ragna or chanting a spell to convince himself, but Ragna roughly understood Carl's situation from those words.

This boy called the doll that attacked him, "sister." There was probably no pretense or delusion in that. He didn't know who did what to whom or why. But the boy's sister was a victim of the relics of the past great war. And he was clinging to the hope that Ragna's grimoire could save her.

The strongest grimoire, a grimoire with immense power. If the rumor was not an overestimation, it should be able to save her. Clinging to that hope, the boy, harboring an age-inappropriate malice, sought Ragna's right arm. Ragna frowned with difficulty. He held his worn-out sword and braced himself.

"Sorry to pour cold water on you, but the Azure Grimoire doesn't have that kind of power."

Saying this as if spitting it out, Ragna clenched his right hand tightly. The amorphous Azure Grimoire was here, in Ragna's right arm. His right arm itself was the grimoire.

Its shape and feel were perfectly that of an arm. But it was a fake, a counterfeit. The "Azure Grimoire" gave Ragna power and at the same time endlessly and inexhaustibly absorbed life force from those around him.

It was a power to take. It had no power to help or save anyone.

But Ragna's words did not reach Carl.

"Shut up! I won't be deceived by such lies. Everyone is a liar!!" Clenching his fist tightly as if crushing the swirling anger, Carl shouted at the top of his voice. His voice was filled with rejection. That couldn't be true. He wouldn't admit it. It shouldn't be. It didn't exist.

In response to Carl's will, the doll stepped forward greatly. A large arm was swung towards Ragna's torso in a scooping motion. At the same time, Carl ran. Borrowing his sister's back, he jumped high and swung down the flagstaff he had pulled out from under his cloak.

"Please hand over the Azure Grimoire!!" Carl's blow came first, followed by Nirvana's claws. Sensing that he couldn't handle both, Ragna vigorously raised his sword with both hands.

"Don't be selfish, kid!"

Power ran through Ragna's right arm, and he wrapped the raised sword in black darkness. Dragging the darkness that flickered like flames, Ragna slammed the sword in his hand into the ground.

The rough slash, with its blade of darkness, cut down both Carl, who was approaching from above, and Nirvana, who was approaching from the front. A sound like burning in the sky roared, hindering the doll's movement and blowing away the boy's body.

"Uwaaah!" Carl's body rolled several times on the promenade. But Carl stood up, staggering. "Hand it over... the grimoire..."

His small body ran. His footsteps were clearly unsteady compared to before. But he closed the distance as if rolling in and slammed the flagstaff. Ragna blocked it with his sword. He clicked his tongue while strongly repelling it.

He couldn't keep this up forever. All of a sudden, the countless wounds he had received last night were claiming their existence from under his clothes like a grudge. A lot of blood had flowed. He wouldn't last long.

And above all, it was annoying.

Carl and Ragna had different experiences in rough situations. This intelligent boy should have already known that he wasn't an opponent who could be reliably killed by clashing head-on.

Yet, the way he sought and wielded power as if he had to, reminded Ragna of his own childhood. A helpless child, a child who couldn't do anything. Struggling, writhing, shouting. Turning away from the emptiness there.

"Enough... shut up!"

Even if he went that far and reached out his hand, even if he stole Ragna's right arm, the Azure Grimoire wouldn't grant the boy's wish.

Ragna forcefully grabbed the flagstaff that had been thrust at him. Carl, taken aback by the unexpected resistance, tried to pull back.

Not allowing that, Ragna pulled Carl towards him and punched him in the side of the face. A muffled breath escaped Carl's mouth. The impact strongly vibrated his head, momentarily stealing his consciousness. His knees buckled, his footing faltered, and Carl, barely clinging to a thread of consciousness, fell backward as if stumbling. He pressed his head with his faltering hand.

"You..." Ragna's throat was choked with the words he wanted to say. Before he could spit them out, a large shadow loomed over Ragna.

Nirvana, turning around at high speed, clasped its hands together overhead and raised them like a hammer. Ragna pulled his sword up and used it as a shield. Nirvana struck with an impact far greater than any previous attack, smashing down on the sword and Ragna.

"Ugh..."

Too heavy, he couldn't support it. It wasn't Ragna's body that reached its limit immediately.

At Ragna's feet, the sound of something shattering rang out. It was the sound of the artificially created park's foundation collapsing.

"Wh-what..." The chilling sense of imminent danger and the collapse of the promenade that had been firmly underfoot happened almost simultaneously.

Gazing up at Nirvana's metallic, lightless eyes, Ragna was dragged down into the suddenly opened hole, unable to offer even the slightest resistance... and was swallowed up in an instant.

3

The forest and the cat. That was most of Ragna's life before he came to be known as the "Grim Reaper."

When Ragna was young, the church where he lived was attacked by a man named Yuuki Terumi, and the sister who had taken care of him like a mother disappeared along with it. His brother and sister were taken away, he lost everything, and Ragna was in despair.

It was a man named Jubei who took Ragna in as his student and took care of him. He wasn't human, but a beastkin, and though his height was about that of a human child, his appearance was that of a bipedal cat.

He had a beautiful coat of two-tone brown and white fur, two long swaying tails, large triangular ears on his head under a different head covering, and large, almost overflowing red eyes. However, the right side of his eye was covered by an eyepatch shaped like a sword guard.

He was a gentle, magnificent, kind foster father. But when he stood before Ragna as a sword master, he turned into a merciless demon, so much so that Ragna thought that there was murderous intent in the depths of his red eyes.

"Guhoaaa!" Ragna, sent flying at tremendous speed, finally stopped when he crashed back-first into a low cliff.

The sun had already set, and the sky was spreading into night. The twinkling stars were beautiful even through the dirty, seithr-tainted air, and the moon was still looking down at him with a cold expression. It seemed like it was about to fall.

Under that night sky, Ragna, half-buried in the dirt in a posture as if he had been "done in," twisted his lips into a natural smile. What escaped was a terribly weak, dry laugh.

"I... I'm alive..." His chest was crushed by the impact of the fall, and he couldn't breathe. As he managed to squeeze out those words, he couldn't inhale, and Ragna coughed violently, still buried in the dirt.

He felt like his whole lunch was about to come up. But thanks to the coughing fit that brought tears to his eyes, his upper body came loose from the cliff.

"Haah, haah... ugh, cough... damn you, old man..."

With ragged breaths and his chest heaving, Ragna stared vacantly in the direction he had flown from. The fact that he had been sent flying this far, snapping thin trees and leaving a trail like a game path, was not due to any intention of his own. His master, the cat beastkin Jubei, had launched him with a log trap set up throughout the forest.

And these weren't just any logs that had been cut down from nearby trees. They were four of them tied together into one log, an unusually thick, homemade trap log made by his master.

He was impressed with himself that he hadn't lost consciousness after being hit head-on by something like that at full speed. But he couldn't help but wonder if the 'strength' he had expected to gain under Jubei wasn't just the toughness to stay conscious even after being blown away by a log.

With a mixture of bewilderment and resignation, Ragna looked at the cat silhouette that had come into view.

"Master..."

There was no light in the night forest. The cat approached with a small lamp, its throat purring with laughter in the orange light.

"What are you laughing at?"

"Oh, nothing. It's just that you flew so spectacularly. Hah hah!" The cat, Jubei, said in a deep, modulated voice that belied his appearance.

There was no hint of fatigue in his cheerful laughter. Even though only Ragna had been sent flying, they had been running around the forest like this since morning.

"Come on, how long are you going to stick to that? Come down." As he said this, he reached out a short arm in an orange jacket and grabbed Ragna's belt. He pulled casually, and Ragna's body came free from the earthen wall with surprising ease. Losing his balance, Ragna stumbled and fell face-first to the ground as if he had been thrown.

"Ugh!" The dirt pressed against his cheek was cold.

The cat's cheerful laughter echoed from above again, reminding Ragna of how pathetic he looked, and he lifted his body, heavy as lead from exhaustion, striking the ground as he did so.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"Hahaha, sorry, sorry, I didn't mean to throw you."

"Then at least help me up before laughing! Ugh, damn..." A sudden dizziness made him stagger back a few steps. Still, not wanting to fall on his face in front of his master again, he braced his knees, which felt like they were about to give way. Seeing this, Jubei's eyes finally held a hint of admiration, the first of the day.

"Oh. You're trying, Ragna...?" His master's rare words were cut short, and the long whiskers on his cat-like nose twitched. His large ears and long tail swayed. Then, his furry mouth softened into a smile. "Looks like we have a rare guest."

"Huh? Guest?" Ragna looked around, wondering what he meant. The night forest was dark. The light from Jubei's lamp illuminated only a small area, making the surrounding shadows even deeper.

There was no sign of anyone else besides Ragna and Jubei. Just as Ragna frowned in suspicion, suddenly, from the shadows of the forest, a strange human figure appeared without a sound or a trace of its presence.

"Whoa!" Thinking it was some kind of eerie, untouchable specter lurking in the shadows of the forest – in other words, a ghost or phantom – Ragna jumped back with exaggerated alarm and let out a scream.

But the figure that stepped into the light of his master's lamp, despite not emitting a single trace of its presence, was surprisingly sensual, a solid, living being that could be clearly understood to be there.

"What kind of noise are you making, boy?" With a voice that sounded like it was sighing in exasperation, Jubei's "guest" scratched its head.

Ragna was speechless at the sight. It was clearly not human. It resembled a beastkin like Jubei, but somehow it was different.

The guest was a woman with a strange atmosphere, possessing a human-like body, cat-like ears and tail, and a face that was neither. She was wrapped in black clothing that covered her head and body completely, and muscular, tanned legs extended from the hem above her knees. Her curly hair that bounced on her back was orange. And her face... it looked like it was just something black stuffed into a shapeless outline.

Was it even a face? In the vaguely defined space that seemed like an empty void or an inserted mask, a red circle that looked like an eye and a white crescent that looked like a mouth were facing Ragna.

"Wh-wha?" Ragna was bewildered and lost for words. Jubei introduced the strange visitor to his student in a very casual manner.

"Ragna. This is an old acquaintance of mine, Torakaka. You've probably never seen one before... she's one of the Kaka clan."

"Kaka... clan?"

It was a name he had never heard before.

Turning her cute, simplistic face, the orange-haired Kaka clan member, Torakaka, replied in a voice that was surprisingly serious for her playful appearance.

"That's right. It's the name used to refer to us since the time of the Dark War, meow."

"Meow!"

"Hmm? Is something wrong? You're a strange child, meow." Torakaka tilted her head as if she didn't understand, at Ragna's sudden shout at the unfamiliar way of speaking. It was as if his question was the odd thing. Ragna opened his mouth to retort, but before the words could form, something small jumped out from behind Torakaka.

"Eh?"

It was a creature that looked very similar to Torakaka, but much smaller. It was obvious enough that there was no need to ask. It was a child of the Kaka clan. While Torakaka wore black clothes, the child wore similar clothes in orange and white.

The small Kaka child was looking at Ragna with a blank expression, its white mouth forming a triangle, but then it circled around Ragna and suddenly clung to his back.

"Whoa!? Wh-what are you doing!?"

"Meow~, high meow, high meow, higher than Sis Tora, meow!"

"Hey, you! Don't climb up people!"

The fur-covered hand was round and soft like a real cat's. The small Kaka child skillfully moved its hand, grabbing Ragna's clothes and climbing up as if it were enjoying climbing a tree.

Ragna struggled and writhed to shake it off, but the small Kaka child slipped through his grasp and quickly reached Ragna's shoulder. It put its feet on Ragna's shoulders, grabbed his hair as if it were a joystick, and let out a cheerful cry.

"Ooh~, what a great view, meow!"

"What's such a great view, get down!"

"No, meow~!"

"Ouch, don't bite me!"

The small Kaka child, thinking it had secured a favorable position, started to rampage as it pleased, while Ragna struggled to shake it off.

Unbeknownst to the noisy pair, Jubei leaned against a tree trunk and Torakaka stood beside him, watching the lively children with a warm gaze that seemed out of place in the dark forest.

"Is that the next guardian?" Jubei asked calmly, his arms folded inside his long sleeves. He placed the lit lamp at his feet. The faint light gently illuminating the area made it feel like being inside a small tent.

Bathed in the orange light from below, Torakaka replied with a face that was still entirely black.

"Yes. Taokaka, meow."

"Taokaka, huh? That's a nice name."

"Tao" means "path". If the path was shown by that energetic little Kaka child, it would surely be bright and cheerful.

"Is he... Master Jubei's... student, meow?" It was Torakaka who asked next. Jubei grinned and stroked his nose with a large hand.

"Ragna. It's a good name, isn't it?"

"I wouldn't know, meow." She had hardly ever thought about whether a name was good or bad. Torakaka said it with her usual seriousness. "But... I think he's a good child, meow."

At those words, Jubei's ears and tail perked up, showing a smug expression as if it were about himself, and then narrowed his large eyes into a smile.

"I know, right?" The voice that said that was very gentle.

January 1, 2200 - Time Unknown, Night

As if being reeled up by a thin thread, a vague consciousness was pulled up from the depths of darkness.

The thread... was a voice. Someone's voice. A voice he'd heard somewhere was calling out.

"...i… oo… i…"

A loud voice called out. It wasn't gentle, but a rough voice that felt like it slammed against him.

But for some reason, he couldn't hate it. It was a voice that seemed to charm you... He'd heard it somewhere before...

"H... Human!? Hey, Good Guy!? What's wrong, meow? Why are you sleeping in a place like this, meow? Wake up, meow, Good Guy, Good Guy, Good Guy!"

"Ugh... shut up..."

With a voice echoing loudly from above his head, constantly calling out as it mercilessly shook his body, Ragna barely managed to lift his heavy eyelids.

In his blurred vision, there was an unfamiliar, dark, bedrock-like background, and filling that background was a close-up of a familiar face peering in. Or rather, it was almost entirely a face.

A completely black face, so much so that it was impossible to discern its outline or thickness, was pushed into a large hood, and within it, a small triangular mouth and perfectly round red eyes floated as if pasted on.

The hood on its curiously tilted head had triangular ears, which twitched occasionally, showing reaction. Furthermore, behind its crouched body, a tail with a white tip swayed.

Despite having cat-like ears and a tail, the figure discernible beneath the ample clothing that covered even the tips of her fingers belonged to a toned young girl. Her bare legs, exposed without any protection, had a healthy tan.

Ragna knew only one person with such a bizarre appearance and who would wake someone up in such an annoying way. But among the many possibilities, he couldn't help but feel relieved that it was this person who had found him.

"Taokaka... More importantly, what are *you* doing?" He tried to get up, but only his fingertips trembled slightly, and his whole body remained motionless as if it had fused with the ground.

"Oh! You're awake, Good Guy! But Good Guy, you're all messed up, meow. You're hurt here and there, meow! Are you okay, meow?" With a casual and light tone that didn't quite match her worried words, the girl with triangular ears, Taokaka, kept changing her expressions and peering at Ragna from right to left.

Beyond the face filling his vision, a gaping hole was visible. Ragna somehow understood.

(Ah... I see. I fell...)

He was fighting a boy named Carl and that eerie Nox Nyctores called Nirvana when he was suddenly swallowed by a large hole that opened up... and that's all he remembered. He didn't know how far he had fallen, but beyond Taokaka, a small hole was visible far in the distance. He probably fell from there.

Outside the hole, it looked like the night sky, and a swelling moon could be seen.

(The moon...)

It looked like it was falling.

"Good Guy? Hey..."

His consciousness drifted away again. Taokaka's voice, which should have been right beside him, sounded blurry and distant. After that, it was instantaneous. As if his regained consciousness was a lie, his vision went dark, and he lost sight of the moon.

And then everything abruptly ended.

4

When the young man opened his eyes, he was in a heavy, inorganic room.

To be precise, he was on a simple bed placed in that room. His body, wrapped in white sheets and a white blanket, was covered in white bandages, leaving no doubt that he had suffered severe injuries and received extensive treatment.

A cold white light illuminated the ceiling. Above his head, instruments measuring his health status were operating, and several meters indicated the condition of the patient lying on the bed through slender cables.

It was as if he were being used for an experiment. This uncomfortable bed with instruments, this closed-off room that felt like a prison – he recognized them both. This was the infirmary located on an Ars Magus ship owned by the NOL.

"...So, someone recovered me," the young man muttered to no one in particular, lying on the bed in the cold infirmary, his body covered in bandages.

Jin Kisaragi.

Commander of the Fourth Thaumaturgist Squadron of the Novus Orbis Librarium, with the rank of major.

Even with his still hazy consciousness, he immediately understood he had been brought to this room by the NOL, given the courtesy of extensive treatment, and had been sleeping here ever since.

His last memory was from the NOL's branch in the 13th Hierarchical City of Kagutsuchi.

After being defeated by his older brother, Ragna the Bloodedge, and left behind, he woke up to the cold feeling of the floor. He remembered dragging his hazy consciousness and body outside from there.

He was probably found unconscious in front of the branch by a guard or a resident from the upper floors. And now, here he was, inside the Ars Magus ship.

Jin sat up and looked around. His hair, which should have been dirty with dust and his own blood, had been neatly wiped clean, and a flash of gold flickered at the edge of his vision. His cold green eyes surveyed the room, and he saw the blue and white outfit of an NOL soldier on a desk a short distance away. It was Jin's uniform.

There was no one in the room. Realizing this, Jin slid out of bed.

Even that caused a dull pain in his chest. Judging from the bandages, some of his ribs were probably broken. But he ignored it and placed his bare feet on the cold floor, making his way to the desk. He picked up the familiar uniform and put it on without hesitation.

(How long... have I been sleeping?)

Jin asked himself blankly, pulling on thick gloves.

The Ars Magus ship was filled with subtle vibrations and a low hum of propulsion. It was flying. It was only a slight difference, but he could feel a different sensation under his feet compared to when it was docked.

(How far away... from Kagutsuchi?)

The fact that the ship was still flying meant that it hadn't been many days. But enough time had passed for the uniform to be washed clean and brought here.

(I have to go... quickly.)

After getting dressed, he turned on his heel and faced the infirmary door.

He had left the NOL without permission and entered Kagutsuchi without any connection to an operation. He had also ignored the subsequent order to return.

He was probably being held here with some kind of charge, whether it was a violation of regulations or something else.

Assuming it would be locked, he reached out to check, but... surprisingly, it wasn't.

Strange. Thinking so, Jin opened the door a crack without making a sound. He surveyed the surroundings. Two guards were standing not far away. They were probably there in place of a lock. Or perhaps they were there to monitor whether Jin would escape the room. Either way, it didn't matter. What he had to do was the same.

Jin flung the door open and ran sliding toward them. Immediately, the guard noticed and braced himself, but Jin brushed aside the stance and swiftly landed a spinning kick to his temple.

"Major..."

Another one. Jin's cold eyes caught the guard who hurriedly tried to stop him, and he pushed off the floor. He twisted his body slightly in the air and slammed his knee into the other man's head. The hard boots made a soft sound as he landed.

After the two guards collapsed to the floor, Jin noticed that their uniforms were blue. But they weren't Jin's subordinates. Which division were they from?

It didn't matter. He had no interest.

Confirming with a glance that they were incapacitated, Jin quietly ran down the corridor. He headed for the cargo hold located in the lower part of the ship.

Sensing the presence of people downstairs, Jin opened his left hand as he ran down the short flight of stairs.

"Yukianesa."

Responding to his voice, a sword with a blue scabbard appeared in Jin's left hand. It was a Nox Nyctores, Mucro Algesco: Yukianesa.

Reaching the corridor in front of the cargo hold, Jin drew his beloved sword and slashed through the air. Not a single person could make a sound.

The magic sword that controlled ice slid through the cold air, and in an instant the narrow corridor was transformed into a world of pure white ice, with the guards all becoming ice statues.

Jin walked calmly through the frozen corridor as if nothing had happened. He cut down the door at the end with his sword.

The cargo hold was dark, but the corridor lights reflected off the ice, providing sufficient illumination inside. Thanks to that, he obtained the descent equipment without any trouble.

Equipping it on his back, Jin swung his sword again. What he cut down was the hatch used for loading and unloading cargo. He made sharp cuts and gave it a kick, and the electronically locked hatch flew outwards with the fragility of a thin sheet of metal.

The night wind rushed in with a roar. Some of the cargo flew and crashed into the wall. There should have been a loud noise, but Jin's ears only registered the swirling sound of the outside air. Looking down, he saw clouds like whitecaps on a raging sea, dragged and torn by the wind, leaving white trails as they flowed. Below that, the dark night ground spread out.

The altitude was quite high. If they were going to conduct a descent operation into the city, they would have to fly much lower.

It was reckless to descend from such a height, no matter how much equipment he had. But there was no hesitation in Jin's expression as he gazed at the flowing clouds and beyond, and certainly no fear whatsoever.

(I have to go back... I have to go quickly.)

All he felt was an almost obsessive, maddening desire.

He had to go. He had to search. He had to find.

...He had to kill.

Emotion spread and wouldn't stop, as if his whole body was freezing from his cold fingertips. The desire was chilling to Jin. Search, find, kill. Kill, kill...

Yukianesa, still clutched in his left hand, felt like it was pulsing. Or perhaps it was a whisper.

It felt like finding the cold blade within himself, being shown it and told, "Here it is."

"...I have to," Jin murmured faintly. Then he leaped across the boundary between the cargo hold and the sky, his right leg extended as he threw himself into the raging sea of white clouds.

There was a shadow watching the whole scene.

It was a man dressed in a black suit that seemed to melt into the dark night. He had folded his lanky, slender legs and was looking down, crouched on top of the airborne Ars Magus ship.

The man, Hazama, was smiling gleefully, holding his hat down to keep it from being snatched away by the strong wind. Moonlight shone down from above, revealing the scenery of the lower world before him.

The man who had unhesitantly jumped down would've probably fallen into the forest. No matter how much descent equipment he had, he wouldn't emerge unscathed. He was already covered with injuries to his flesh, bones, and nerves. The pain was suppressed by anesthesia, but he was far from a condition to move around freely.

"And yet, Major Kisaragi is being so reckless," Hazama said, moving his thinly stretched lips and speaking mockingly into the void.

However, the person who jumped might not have even hesitated or even realized the severity of his wounds. After all, his judgment was currently severely impaired.

"If he accidentally died from this, it would make things a lot easier for me... but it's not going to be that simple, is it?"

Accidents or chance wouldn't kill that man.

Shrugging as if bothered, Hazama stretched out his long, slender legs and stood up on the roof of the Ars Magus ship. The wind blowing from behind roughly flapped his suit jacket.

His gaze was fixed on the night, which was filled with darkness. Beyond it, the lights of a Hierarchical City could be seen.

The 13th Hierarchical City of Kagutsuchi.

Beneath his hat and long bangs, Hazama narrowed his eyes further, smiling at the distant night view.

"Well, now that I've seen him off... I suppose it's time I left," Hazama said aloud. Behind him, the darkness of the night somehow took on a form.

It was unclear whether or not the figure that melted into the darkness was a person, but it was wearing a long coat and a large triangular hat. Even as the wide hem fluttered in the strong night wind, it didn't reveal its inside even for a moment. Perhaps there was no substance inside it at all.

Hazama glanced over his shoulder at the shadow behind him and grinned.

"Transfer us, Phantom."

Their destination was the very top of the 13th Hierarchical City of Kagutsuchi, the peak of the peak he had just been looking at. He had to go and see the specially ordered monument he had set up there.

At Hazama's distorted and lowered voice, the shadow called Phantom concentrated its magical power without any gesture or word, and together with Hazama, vanished from the top of the Ars Magus ship.

Chapter 3: Fragile balance — The Power of Order

0

A thick, special glass case was her bed. The inside was filled with a blue liquid, and while she slept, the sound of bubbles rising could always be heard.

It was a cold and narrow place, but at least it wasn't so painful she could cry... It was a place filled with a dull pain in her fingertips and a gentle feeling of pressure.

"...Alright. Lambda, look at me. Can you see me?"

The lighting was minimal, and the room was dimly lit, suffocatingly enclosed by metal walls, a metal floor, and a metal ceiling. Equipment was crammed in as if there was no space, with various colored lamps lit up here and there, and countless data displayed on numerous monitors.

A voice was heard amidst all this. Lambda's hearing recognized the woman's intimidating voice, and she moved her head as ordered.

Her awkward movements made her appear like a girl, like a machine, or something precisely in between.

Her delicate body was encased in a suit that fit without any gaps, and several parts were attached on top, as if she were wearing armor. Her legs were shaped like wide sword blades, somewhat different from the outline of human legs. Her arms had human-like fingers, but they also had parts resembling sword blades or gauntlets attached, which were clearly weapons for fighting. On her back, eight swords floated in a regular arrangement, as if obeying the girl.

The dangerous equipment suggested only a purpose to harm others. In contrast, her long, soft golden hair tied in braids and the barely visible mouth of her bare skin beneath the headgear that mostly hid her face were strikingly unbalanced.

Her tightly drawn lips were shaped in a way that suggested they would form an incredibly lovely curve if she smiled.

"Target, confirmed. Recognition, Kokonoe, Doctor." Lambda moved her lovely lips slightly and answered in a still somewhat awkward, inorganic voice. The single red eye in the center of her headgear blinked rapidly. That was, in a way, Lambda's eye. It analyzed and parsed what she perceived visually using radar and monitors.

And all that data was sent to the terminal of Kokonoe, the sharp-eyed woman adjusting Lambda in front of her, and recorded.

"For now, everything's fine up to this point. Although, if there were problems with such basic parts, it wouldn't be of any use," Kokonoe muttered harshly as she checked the data on her terminal, then put the small lollipop she was holding in her mouth.

From between the pink hair gathered in a high ponytail, a cat's ear, folded forward, peeked out. Two cat tails, the same pink color as her hair, swayed demurely to the right and left on the back of the white coat she wore.

If Lambda was somewhere between a girl and a machine, Kokonoe seemed to be somewhere between a human and a cat. Indeed, Kokonoe was exactly in between, born to a human mother and a beastkin father who was a cat.

Even with her unusual birth, she was an oddity at Sector Seven, a research institution established after breaking away from the NOL, but what made Kokonoe's existence particularly unique was her obsessive research attitude.

Thus, connecting the decaying body of a girl she had recovered several years ago with machinery, and even giving her a soul and adjusting her, was an act born from that obsession.

"Lambda, λ-No.11-, I'm giving you a task. You could even call it a mission." Her thought processes were functioning sufficiently. After confirming this, Kokonoe looked at Lambda and declared in a sharp voice that seemed to pierce through her. "There's a man who needs to be killed. You are my sword for that purpose. That's why you're here. That's why you were born... You understand, don't you?"

Those words embodied Kokonoe's obsession. But unaware of the hatred that quietly flickered beneath the words, unaware of the rage, Lambda simply answered calmly, like a machine.

"Understood... Information, recording."

Information, information, information. Lambda's insides were made up of a vast amount of information. Most of it was given to her by Kokonoe, and her previous self that was incredibly thin, bland, ambiguous, and empty.

All that existed was piercing pain. Nothing but suffering. Memories that were close to the limit. Nothing but memories of seeking someone, asking for help.

But now it was different. She had gained moving limbs, and was given eyes that could see. She was asked for a voice, and given a soul.

She was taught many things. She memorized many things, and learned many things.

Including that man.

"..."

Kokonoe looked up at the pained voice that escaped her slightly moving lips.

Lambda stood on her blade-like feet, facing forward, and while simply gazing at the inorganic room without any intention, she unconsciously moved her lips again, as if drawn by something.

"Rag... na."

That was the name. Was it her body, or her soul? Whatever it was that had intruded into her recording area, that name resonated within Lambda with a terribly special, beloved... madness.

"Hmph. Do you want to meet Ragna the Bloodedge?" Kokonoe asked, putting the candy in her mouth again. It was a homemade tonic candy.

(Ragna the Bloodedge...)

Lambda recorded the name she had just heard. Deeply, deeply, as if engraving it into her soul.

What had Professor Kokonoe asked? It took a second of lag for her to recall and understand. It was a word that had been ringing in the back of her mind for who knew how long. Lambda spoke it with a girl's lips, with a girl's voice.

"...I want to meet him."

Ragna.

That alone was the only "desire" Lambda possessed.

1

January 1, 2200 - 23:03

A basin of water was brought into a warmly lit room.

The one who brought it was a woman with glossy black hair tied up high. Crossing the room quickly in high-heeled shoes, she placed the basin on a stand and soaked a clean cloth in the water.

Wringing it out, the woman took the arm of a girl, Noel, who was sitting small on a compact chair, and wiped away the dust and sand stains that had accumulated.

"Um... I'm sorry. For barging in so late at night, and also..."

"Don't worry about it. Where do you think you are, soldier?" The woman interrupted Noel with a slightly forceful tone, whose small body shrank further as she apologized.

She was Litchi Faye-Ling. A female doctor who ran a small clinic in Orient Town, which spread out in the lower levels of Kagutsuchi, and the owner of the rendezvous point specified by Makoto.

Late at night, overwhelmed by the atmosphere of the unfamiliar lower city streets and getting lost in the narrow alleys, Noel had somehow managed to find and reach the clinic Makoto had mentioned.

Litchi was initially suspicious upon seeing the NOL's uniform, but when Noel mentioned Makoto's name and explained the situation, and more importantly, when she noticed Noel's various injuries, she immediately pulled her arm and invited her inside.

Then, after seating Noel on a chair in the examination room, she prepared for treatment with such briskness that Noel hesitated to even speak.

"To get this many injuries and expect to have them treated at my clinic is a big mistake. This wound here is a bit deep... Not deep enough to stitch, but we need to make sure it doesn't get infected. Oh, you even got a cut on your face..."

Speaking as if scolding her, Litchi carefully wiped away the dirt from Noel's arms, face, and legs, her expression filled with nothing but concern and worry.

This was the lower level, Orient Town. The people of the lower levels did not have positive feelings towards the NOL. Even on her way here today, Noel had been subjected to many cold stares. Anger, distrust, contempt, and disgust. But she didn't sense any of those emotions from Litchi.

Litchi understood the meaning of the blue and white uniform, yet she was treating Noel as just another patient.

Thinking that, the tension that had been holding her up for the past few hours naturally eased, and her tense shoulders dropped as if sighing in relief.

"Thank you," Noel's words spilled out. Litchi returned a smile.

"You're welcome."

At that smile, Noel's heart couldn't help but pound.

Litchi was truly a beautiful person. Her skin was white and smooth even up close, and her eyes, visible through her glasses, were blacker than her hair, like wet jewels. Her well-defined nose and eyebrows gave elegance to each of her expressions, and her rouged lips added glamour to each breath.

The red dress, which suited the gaudy Orient Town, was loose-fitting, yet it revealed the lines of her full chest and firm waist. Together with her long legs peeking out from the deep slit, she couldn't help but steal everyone's gaze. Just facing her like this, it was as if a sweet, inviting scent wafted in the air.

"Even so, that soldier, Makoto Nanaya, right? It's really surprising that she would use such a remote clinic as a hideout for her friend," Litchi said, dabbing at a small cut on Noel's cheek with disinfectant-soaked cotton, a look of both admiration and astonishment on her face, her long eyelashes casting shadows.

While noticing the sweet scent emanating from Litchi as she got closer and the smell of disinfectant stinging the wound on her cheek, Noel looked up questioningly.

"What's your relationship with Makoto? I haven't heard anything about you and Makoto yet."

She was just told it was a place to hide. But given that Makoto designated it as a meeting place without hesitation in this situation, Noel understood that there was a great deal of trust there.

Litchi looked surprised for a moment, then lowered her eyebrows with a wry smile, as if it was unexpected.

"Actually, I only met Makoto-san this morning," she said, pressing a gauze pad against a small laceration on Noel's forehead. It was only after Litchi's long fingertips moved away that Noel finally realized the meaning of "this morning."

"This morning? You mean this morning today!? So, you haven't even known each other for a full day?"

"That's right." Litchi chuckled with her red lips and proceeded to treat the wound on Noel's arm.

Noel's body, having crawled out from underground, was dirtier with dust than she had thought, and as it was carefully wiped, she found wounds she hadn't even noticed. Litchi disinfected each one properly and applied medicine to some of them, moving her hands without hesitation as she spoke.

"You know about the big explosion that happened last night, right? Because of that explosion, even here in Orient Town, various buildings collapsed, and there were landslides. Many people were sacrificed. A lot of injured people were brought to my clinic too," Litchi said, a hint of sadness in her tone, as she wrapped a bandage around Noel's arm. When the ends were lightly tied, whether it was because the wound was no longer exposed to the outside air or because of the slightly warm, clean cloth, Noel felt a little relieved.

"But everyone who brought them in was injured themselves. It's not easy to carry seriously injured people or rescue people buried in rubble in that kind of condition... And then I noticed Makoto Nanaya-san had naturally joined everyone and was helping with the rescue efforts."

"Makoto, helping with rescue..." Noel said, sounding somewhat pleased. It was just like Makoto. She must have discarded the black poncho indicating his affiliation with the Intelligence Department, and was moving around among the people of Orient Town.

Makoto was a person with a strong sense of justice, someone who wouldn't turn a blind eye to what she believed was right.

"I heard about you when Makoto left the clinic in a hurry, saying she had to go on ahead. She said she came to find an important friend. And then she asked if she could use this place as a base to escape from the NOL, even though she thought it might cause trouble." After treating the lacerations on Noel's thighs, Litchi sat down on the chair in front of her. "For now, could you take off your clothes? You're covered in wounds, and your uniform has various stains, so I'd like to examine areas that aren't visible."

"T-take off my clothes? But, um..." Noel instinctively pulled her arms in as if to hug herself.

It's not that she was averse to exposing her skin to others, but suddenly taking off her clothes in front of someone she's just met wasn't a common occurrence. Especially not in front of a woman with such an obviously stunning figure, even when clothed.

"What's there to be embarrassed about? I'm a doctor, you know? Is it so strange to be nervous in front of a doctor?"

Litchi's words made sense. Even so, Noel still felt unnecessarily nervous. Noel couldn't help but compare her chest with Litchi's, and the overwhelming difference made her gasp.

But Litchi was a doctor. What could be unnatural about taking off clothes and receiving an examination in front of a doctor?

"O-okay, I understand."

If she kept hesitating, she would not only inconvenience Litchi but also be rude to her kindness.

Making up her mind, Noel untied her necktie, unbuttoned her chest, and undid the clasps holding her uniform together at the top and bottom. The fabric of the uniform slid down her skin, exposing Noel's skin to the light and bunching up around her waist.

Ashamed of her rather flat chest and thin body, Noel naturally looked away.

"Ah, look. Just as I thought." Litchi said with a sigh, gently touching Noel's abdomen. There was a large bruise, and a small scratch, though only superficial, ran across her white skin below her chest. "It's hot. It doesn't seem like there's anything wrong with the bones, though."

Litchi took some white ointment on her fingertips and applied it to the swollen area near the bruise, and Noel flinched slightly at the cool sensation. Mistaking it for pain, Litchi touched her even more gently.

"I probably shouldn't say this to a soldier, but you can't just keep getting injured. You're a girl, after all."

From her tone alone, Noel could tell that there was no contempt or belittlement, just pure concern. Noel remembered her foster mother saying something similar to her just before she started working as a soldier for the NOL. Litchi was obviously too young to be called a mother, so maybe this was what it would be like to have an older sister.

Such a selfish thought crossed her mind.

"Yes... Thank you."

It felt somewhat ticklish. In reality, it was impossible for a soldier to avoid getting injured, but for this moment, Noel forgot she was a soldier and nodded honestly.

"...Oh." Suddenly, Litchi's hand, which had been checking Noel's body, stopped. The black eyes behind her glasses changed from the gentle atmosphere they had held until now to something sharp. "This is...?"

"Huh? Ah." Noel belatedly understood what Litchi had found, and her complexion darkened slightly, looking a little awkward.

What had caught the black, intelligent eyes was a small mark on Noel's chest.

2

On Noel's chest, on her white skin, was a black mark, like a signpost, depicting spread wings and the number "twelve."

Noel reached out to touch the strange mark, of which she could only see about half from her own perspective, and tilted her chin.

"I... I don't really understand this. I don't remember anything from before I was adopted by my current parents. It seems like it's been there since I was found."

She didn't know what to call herself before she became Noel Vermillion, but this mark on her chest was the only trace of her former self. It was like a scar she had no memory of, and Noel didn't like it very much. It was as if it were a model number for a doll.

Litchi frowned slightly and stared at the mark for a while, but then a smile appeared on her lips, and she sat up.

"...That's enough. You can put your clothes back on. Thank you."

"No, not at all. Thank you... Oh!" Noel, relieved that Litchi's smile had returned, suddenly jumped and was startled while still half-naked.

Following Noel's blank stare and half-open mouth, Litchi realized what had surprised her. What Noel was looking at was a small panda plush that was clinging to Litchi's hair. However, to be precise, it wasn't a plush. As Noel, still forgetting to put on her clothes, was now seeing... that panda was climbing up Litchi's hair, as if it were a mountain or something.

"Th-that panda is..."

"Oh, did I startle you? I'm sorry. This one is called Lao Jiu..." As she said this, Litchi casually reached up and picked up the small panda from her hair. The panda, Lao Jiu, struggled with its short arms and legs, trying to escape from Litchi's hand, but soon calmed down and turned its face towards Noel, who was watching it intently.

Instantly, Noel felt her heart leap. Her chest tightened with a pang, and she found herself reaching out towards Lao Jiu, as if drawn by an invisible force. Litchi chuckled softly and placed Lao Jiu in Noel's hand. Lao Jiu sat quietly in Noel's hand.

Gently cradling it, Noel's eyes sparkled as she poked and kneaded the small, palm-sized panda with her fingertips.

"So... cute..."

"Do you like it? This one is, well... my cute partner, I suppose. It looks like a plush, doesn't it?"

The feel was soft, just like a plush. But in reality, Lao Jiu was a living creature. A magical creature created by Litchi. It had a small body and adorable appearance, but it was actually connected to the Boundary and supplied Litchi with extraordinary power.

However, Litchi didn't talk about Lao Jiu's true nature, and Noel was also completely fascinated by the charming panda in her hand. Could such a cute creature really exist? She thought this as she continued to poke and stroke it.

"...Noel-san. You should put on your clothes soon. You'll catch a cold, you know." How long had she been doing that?

When Litchi, finally exasperated, called out to her, Noel snapped out of her daze as if waking up from a nap and hurriedly returned Lao Jiu to Litchi.

"S-sorry, I'll put them on right away! And thank you very much for letting me hold Lao Jiu-san!"

"You're welcome."

Realizing the situation, Noel reached for the clasps to fix her clothes in front of Litchi, who gently returned Lao Jiu to her hair with a soft smile.

Just then—

"Tatatatata, tatata it's an emergency, Meow~~~~~!!"

"Kyaaa!"

Violently shattering the stillness of the night, the clinic's door burst open, and something like a large ball came flying into the room. It bounced off the walls and ceiling several times before landing between Noel and Litchi.

Or so it seemed, but the ball jumped up and, with enough force to fly off, grabbed Noel's shoulders tightly.

"It's an emergency, meow, it's an emergency, meow! Boobie Lady, it's an emergency... meow?" It wasn't a ball, but a person. Or rather, could it even be called a person?

It certainly had a human, girlish figure and voice, but on top of the ample hood it wore, large triangular ears twitched busily, and on its back, something like a cat's tail with a white tip stood straight up.

Most bizarre of all was what was inside the hood. Instead of a girl's face that one might expect from the voice, it was filled with opaque blackness. Red circles instead of pupils, a white triangle instead of a mouth, formed an expression as if wondering... and it was staring at Noel's chest.

"Oh, oh? It's not... it's not there, meow..."

Not only was it staring, but it was using both hands, which were covered to the fingertips, to grope Noel's modest chest as if lifting it from below.

Noel was utterly bewildered and blushing furiously at the series of abrupt events, and the girl with cat-like ears and a tail looked down at her own hands, declaring in dismay, "Boobs... there aren't any boobs, meow!"

"What do you mean, there aren't any?!" Noel couldn't help but shout reflexively. At that voice, the black-faced, cat-eared girl finally looked up.

"Oh? You're not Boobie Lady, meow."

"Tao... I'm over here. And I asked you to stop calling me that, remember?" Litchi called out, touched her temple as if she had a headache. Instantly, the cat-eared girl called Tao, or rather Taokaka, turned around to face Litchi with the smooth movement of a real cat.

"Oh, Boobie Lady~! You were over here, meow. You surprised me, meow." Far from apologetic, Taokaka seemed happy to have found Litchi, her tail quivering, and she changed her pursed lips into a crescent shape and smiled.

Litchi crossed her arms as if hugging herself and looked at Noel, lowering her eyebrows.

"I'm sorry for the suddenness. This girl is Taokaka... she's from a slightly different tribe, you see. She often comes to play here."

"Oh, was that so? Well, um, nice to meet you, Taokaka-san. I'm Noel Vermillion." Remembering that her clothes were still disheveled, Noel hurriedly straightened them while trying to be as friendly as possible.

She wasn't bothered by what had just happened. Or at least, she wanted to move on as if nothing had happened. But at the same time, Taokaka's shocked cry still lingered in Noel's chest.

Taokaka turned around again to face Noel and raised a hand hidden in her sleeve.

"Oh, Tao is Taokaka, meow! Nice to meet you, Miss No-Boobs!" Her innocent and cheerful smile was so carefree that it seemed impossible to find any malice in it, utterly bright and open. That's why Noel couldn't muster a strong reply.

"M-Miss No-Boobs..." Noel muttered hopelessly, barely managing to squeeze it out. She glanced down at her chest and placed her hand on it. They weren't exactly ample, but she didn't think they were so nonexistent as to warrant such a description. But compared to Litchi, who was present in the same room...

"Boobie Lady..." Noel glanced at Litchi. Indeed. There was an undeniable forcefulness there.

Sensing the meaning of Noel's sorrowful gaze, Litchi changed the subject and asked Taokaka, "Well, anyway, Tao. Didn't you have some business? Didn't you say it was an emergency?"

"Oh, that's right, meow, I completely forgot! A little while ago, Good Guy fell from above with a *whoosh*, and he's all messed up and in pieces! It's terrible, meow! And the Chief said to bring Boobie Lady here quickly, meow!" Taokaka clapped her rounded hands, shaped like cat paws, with a soft *pop*, and Litchi tilted her head in confusion.

"Good Guy?" It wasn't easy to pinpoint a specific person from the nickname Taokaka casually gave out.

When Litchi asked, Taokaka put her hand to her mouth and looked up at the ceiling, thinking.

"Hmm, a good guy with white, spiky hair and red clothes, meow. He bought Tao food before, meow. Let me see... Ragnya?" As she described him while trying to remember, Litchi gasped softly. White hair and red clothes. She had just encountered such a man in the sewers the other day.

"Could it be, Ragna the Bloodedge?"

"I think he said something like that, meow."

The name that Litchi spoke and Taokaka confirmed made Noel gasp this time. Clenching both hands tightly, Noel leaned towards Taokaka.

"Ragna-san... Did you just say he was all messed up!?"

"Meow. He looked like he was about to die, meow."

"No way..."

The memory of Ragna's dismissive gaze when they parted in the mid-level park a few hours ago came back to her. He must have been much more injured than Noel at that time, though he hadn't let on. What had happened to him after they parted?

"Anyway, he needs treatment. Let's go immediately."

Becoming a doctor in the blink of an eye, Litchi stood up and took a bag for house calls from the corner of the examination room. Quickly packing it with things that would be necessary for treating injuries, she glanced at Noel.

"Noel-san, please wait here. I'll be right back." Litchi's preparations were finished in no time, and the bag was quickly closed. Following her, Noel kicked off the examination chair and stood up.

"W-wait! Please take me with you!" Her mouth had moved on its own before her thoughts could catch up. Her chest was restless. She couldn't imagine the kind of injuries that would make someone seem like they were about to die, and she felt a rising anxiety swell within her.

Unable to even properly hold onto the anxiety that felt like it was about to slip away, Noel pleaded with a desperation that surprised even herself.

"I want to go with you too!"

"But you..."

She had come all this way to meet Makoto. Litchi stopped the words she was about to continue.

After thinking for a moment, she lifted the heavy bag for house calls with surprising ease.

"...Alright. I'll ask one of the helpers to watch the clinic, so come along."

Litchi couldn't stop someone who wanted to rush to someone's side. Even if the person they were going to treat was a wanted criminal and dangerous felon, and the girl who wanted to go was a member of the NOL who should be arresting criminals.

Besides, Noel's eyes didn't have the look of an NOL soldier at all. It was as if... she was driven only by the desire to do something for him, having completely forgotten her proper role and calm judgment, just like Litchi herself had been in the past.

Unaware of the compassion that floated in Litchi's intelligent eyes that blinked behind her glasses, Noel's expression brightened at the beautiful woman's kindness, and she bowed deeply.

"Thank you very much!"

Considering the possibility that Makoto might return while they were away, she left a hastily written note, and then Noel was urged outside by Taokaka.

The sky wasn't visible from Orient Town.

While feeling the dazzling neon lights and the deafening noise of the bustling main street, Noel hurried away from the lower city, further and further out, her heart beating faster in her chest.

The forest night was, as expected, dark.

Having entered the forest at night countless times in his childhood, the darkness was nothing new to him. But the deep darkness was still deep, and the shadows of the towering trees seemed endless, giving the illusion that he was passing through the same place repeatedly.

Amidst such unchanging and gloomy scenery, Jin continued to walk silently and steadily.

It had been several hours since he had jumped from the flying Ars Magus ship. The descent equipment had done its job perfectly and had finished its mission by getting caught in a tree in the forest.

He had thought that his whole body would fall apart from the pain at the moment of landing and for a few minutes after, but fortunately, he had escaped without any injuries from the descent.

He had no problem walking. So Jin walked.

(I have to go.)

As if driven by a bothersome yet irresistible temptation that commanded him from the depths of his mind.

The branches and leaves that had covered his head like a roof suddenly parted, allowing the moonlight to pass through as if spreading their arms. White light pierced through the vision that had been filled with shadows and darkness.

"The moon..."

The moon, which had been full last night, was again losing and gaining light as it looked down on the playing ground.

Drawn by that light, Jin raised his gaze and furrowed his brow with displeasure. The instinctive chill that ran down his spine came from a childish fear, and he felt pathetic that he was still disturbed by such trivial things.

Jin quietly stopped walking. It wasn't that he was drawn by the moon.

"Yo. You finally made it."

In the moonlight, a small figure leaning against a tree trunk found Jin and turned around, its face suggesting he had been waiting a long time. This time, Jin frowned not at the moon, but at the figure standing in his path.

It wasn't a human. Though its head and entire body were hidden under an orange hood and clothes, the face illuminated by the moonlight was that of a beast.

It was a cat, about the size of a human child, that stood and acted like a human. A beastkin.

"Who are you?" Jin pulled his chin back and glared sharply at the beastkin. He didn't know any beastkin like this. Furthermore, he couldn't think of any beastkin who could ambush him in this forest where he'd descended from the Ars Magus ship.

But the beastkin facing him didn't seem to care about Jin's cold intensity and gave a wry smile with his feline face.

"You really don't remember me? That's a shame, but I suppose it can't be helped." He spoke as if he had known Jin's face for a long time. That made Jin uncomfortable, and his frown deepened.

"I asked who you are."

"My name? I'm... Jubei."

"Jubei?"

The name the beastkin gave made Jin feel even more wary and suspicious.

Jubei. It was a special name for anyone who had studied history.

The Dark War that began a hundred years ago. The worst war in history, where humanity's survival was at stake. At that time, there were six heroes who stood against the calamity called the Black Beast and fought at the forefront of humanity. They were called the "Six Heroes."

There was "Hakumen," who was considered the leader, "Nine," who created magic and Nox Nyctores, "Valkenhayn," who took command, "Yuuki Terumi," who would later betray the Six Heroes, a sorcerer whose name was not passed down, and "Jubei," who was the commanding officer.

"You're claiming to be a hero? That's ridiculous." Jin spat out, calling it absurd.

The Six Heroes were beings from a hundred years ago. It wasn't even certain if they actually existed. Almost no official documents remained to prove their existence, and no one alive knew their true identities.

But to dismiss the beastkin in front of him as just spouting nonsense and walk past him was impossible. He had a casual stance, yet he had a sharpness that made it seem as if he was already bracing himself and had drawn the sword on his back, pinning Jin's feet to the spot.

Suspicion turned into a premonition.

"...Could you really be one of the Six Heroes?"

"There was a time when I was called that, long ago." The hero nicknamed "One-Eyed of the Twin Lotus" shrugged lightly and casually confirmed Jin's premonition.

It was hard to believe. Jin still couldn't get rid of the suspicious wrinkles between his eyebrows as he stared at the ancient hero.

Jubei returned his gaze and sighed softly.

"...You're in a terrible state. Do you want to kill me?"

"What?"

"Whether it's a pebble or something else in my way, I'll kill it. That's the look in your eyes. Though... if you've been holding onto something like that, it's no wonder." As if to replace his gaze, Jubei looked at the sword held in Jin's hand.

The Nox Nyctores, Mucro Algesco: Yukianesa. Housed in its blue sheath, it could be summoned to Jin's hand at will, yet he held it tightly as if he wouldn't let it out of his grasp.

Jin tightened his grip on the sheath, ready to draw it at any moment. His eyes held the look Jubei had pointed out.

"If you understand, then move aside. A former hero and a pebble are the same to me."

"You intend to fight me? Don't think you can fight properly in that state. I'm strong, you know?"

"You're wounded too." He didn't like the cat-like eyes that lit up with a challenging light as if mocking him. Jin spoke coldly and reached for Yukianesa's hilt with his right hand.

The scent of injury wafted from Jubei. He might have been trying to hide it with his clothes and calm expression, but the unpleasant smell of rotting blood or festering flesh was particularly noticeable in the forest, where there were hardly any artificial odors. He couldn't tell the specifics of Jubei's injuries, but Jin was probably in much better shape.

Jubei's mouth twisted into a wry smile at Jin's judgement.

"As expected, you saw through it. You're quite sharp. Different from your brother."

Brother.

The murderous intent swirling within Jin let him quickly realize who Jubei was referring to.

Ragna the Bloodedge.

"Brother..." Jin muttered in a hoarse voice, and his fingers clenched the blue sheath tightly on their own. His arm, his back, trembled. He felt a surging desire.

He wanted to tear that skin, pierce that flesh, and shatter those bones. He wanted to feel the elasticity of the entrails, hear the sound of nerves snapping, and finally, watch the head bounce on the ground... how much...

"...Get out of my way." Feeling a dizzy spell, Jin bit down on his back teeth to endure it and told Jubei. "Next time, I'll cut you down."

As he said this, he lowered his eyelids, containing the raging emotions within himself. Not yet. Now was not the time to unleash this impulse. The one he should strike down was not here.

"Good grief. I'm glad I called out to you here. Jin, don't rely too much on that sword. In your current state, you'll be killed by either Yukianesa or Ragna soon."

"What?"

Jubei's tone was more concerned than threatening. It irritated him. Jin frowned sharply and glared at Jubei.

"Don't spout nonsense, cat. Me, get killed? I'm Yukianesa's master. Besides, I'm the one who will kill my brother."

"Don't be so cocky. Just listen to me. It's about you... and something the world needs to hear."

The world, huh. It was a disgustingly pretentious word he wanted to laugh off. But Jin swallowed his sarcasm and waited for Jubei to continue.

He had no intention of trusting the beastkin's story. But it wouldn't be too late to decide whether it was necessary for him after hearing it. And if it was truly a pointless story, then he would cut down Jubei, whether he was the "One-Eyed of the Twin Lotus" or one of the Six Heroes.

Jubei received the wind of murderous intent coming from Jin as if it were a child's bluff and looked back with an unusually serious gaze.

"Jin. Do you know what 'the Power of Order' is?" The words, which he heard for the first time, reached Jin's ears with a heavy weight. "The world is always seeking balance. If one force exists, another opposing force exists, and the forces maintain balance without either becoming

too strong. If one grows strong, the other force grows equally strong. Conversely, if one weakens and withers, the other follows suit."

Like the scales of a balance that never tilt to one side, like a precarious balancing doll that never falls.

Standing in the bluish-white moonlight streaming through the trees of the forest, Jubei continued his story with a solemn air.

"The 'Power of Order' also exists in the world, paired with another force. It's exactly as the words imply. The 'Power of Order' is for maintaining the world's order. And its opposing force... you understand, don't you?"

Something that destroys order.

Destruction, chaos, there were many names for it. But what was important was not the name, but its essence. That power destroyed order, and consequently, the balance of the world itself.

"The current world is in a dangerous balance. A world that had long enjoyed a temporary stability has suddenly stepped into an unfamiliar land. The distortions that were originally present will only grow larger from now on."

"...I'm not interested in how the world works. If such a pointless lecture is your business, then I'm leaving." Jin's expression, which had been suspicious, was now weary and resentful. It was even more boring than he had expected. He didn't even think it was worth stopping, and he started walking past Jubei.

Jubei stopped him with a single word, neither scolding nor restraining him.

"The 'Power of Order,' Jin, is the power you possess."

Jin's foot, which was about to step forward, remained glued to the ground, unable to lift. One more step and he could pass the small beastkin. At that distance, Jin lowered his gaze, as if being drawn, to the former hero beside him.

Jubei looked at the place where Jin had been standing, as if reminiscing about something, and continued.

"The 'Power of Order' is a power that the world created, a power to resist. A power that desires survival, not destruction, a power to repel the end. It's different from Yukianesa. Different from something that feeds on murderous intent and drives you to impulsive slaughter."

Jubei implicitly asked where Jin's "murderous intent" came from.

Nox Nyctores deeply interfere with the user's mind, amplifying and drawing out their murderous intent, malice, fighting instinct, fear, and self-defense instinct, using them as sustenance. And the resulting power is given to the user.

"Jin. You are currently deeply influenced by Yukianesa, merely being dragged along by your emotions. Look at yourself more closely. You have enough power to fight even without such a sword." The cat's eyes looked up at Jin with a glaring intensity.

As if to shake it off, Jin swung the sheathed sword wildly through the air. That much distance opened up between him and Jubei.

"Nonsense! It's my job to kill my brother, it's what I wanted!"

Why?

As he raised his voice, doubt seeped in like ink spreading in water.

"I'm the one who will kill my brother... kill!" Why? Why?

The figure of his brother's back, which he had chased as a child, flashed through his mind. The brother he had loved. The brother he had admired. The brother he had sought. The brother he couldn't reach. The brother he couldn't have all to himself.

But, ah, whose fault is it that my hands are so cold? Is it the fault of the brother who wouldn't return my grasp? Is that a sin worthy of death?

(Why do I...?)

Why do I want to kill my brother so badly? Where does this overwhelming murderous intent, this impulse, come from?

"You're going to Kagutsuchi, aren't you? It'll take a night to walk there. So you should think carefully. What is it that you want to do? What is it that you truly want to kill, with your own will?" Jubei said to Jin, who was silent with his lips pressed tightly together, as if admonishing him. His face was somewhat like a father's. "Don't be dragged along by Yukianesa. It's just a weapon. You're the one living in this era. You're the one who decides. Don't make a mistake. Don't give in... Think."

Think about who you are.

Leaving those words behind, Jubei turned on his heel and sank his small back into the forest. The deep night shadows swallowed him up immediately, and the sound of his footsteps, which hadn't been there from the beginning, vanished, erasing even the beastkin's presence. All that remained was silence, moonlight, and Jin.

The night wind blew through, pushing Jin's back. His faltering foot took a step forward. And then Jin started walking.

The night was still deep, and morning was far away.

4

It felt like he had been sinking in the depths of darkness for a long time.

The sensation of rising from it was like being weighed down by lethargy, annoying and heavy. But like thin nets being peeled away one by one, his consciousness gradually lightened.

Slowly, sensation began to reside in his nerves, and he knew he was sleeping. Or perhaps he had been unconscious. His eyelids were closed, and he was lying on something like a futon. A blanket seemed to be covering him.

Beyond his lowered eyelids, he could hear someone's voice. A familiar voice... a voice he knew.

That's right, this is... this voice is...

"...Saya..."

Unconsciously, his lips moved, and Ragna called out his sister's name as he thinly lifted his eyelids.

In his blurred vision, he saw the figure of a girl. Long golden hair that stretched straight, delicate shoulders, white skin. The green eyes that turned towards Ragna's faint voice quickly filled with tears.

(What the hell...)

Again. His sister always cried like that whenever something happened to him.

Before the tears fell, he had to wipe them away. Thinking so, he reached out his hand to the cheek looking down at him.

"You're crying again?" He tried to smile to reassure her. His cheek wouldn't cooperate, and it turned into a deflated sigh. The girl, who looked like she was about to cry at any moment, firmly gripped Ragna's outstretched hand.

—Brother.

"Ragna-san!"

"...Huh?"

At the call that was different from the words he had expected to hear, Ragna suddenly came to his senses.

He blinked a few times. Gradually, his vision, and then his head, began to see reality as if a fog was thinning.

A brown wooden ceiling, roughly finished stone walls, cloths hung here and there, perhaps as decoration or to block drafts, and a floating light swaying with an orange glow. It was a room he had seen somewhere before. But it certainly wasn't the scenery of the church where he had spent time with his sister.

More importantly, the one holding his hand and looking at him wasn't his sister, Saya.

Long golden hair falling from her shoulders, moist green eyes, and a familiar uniform based on blue and white... It was Noel.

"Ragna-san, are you okay? Do you recognize me!?"

"Ah... yeah. If I remember correctly... Noel, was it?" Overwhelmed by her forceful manner, Ragna answered somewhat blankly.

Instantly, the tears that had seemed to recede, perhaps due to surprise, swelled up greatly in Noel's wide eyes. After a pause as if she was slowly inhaling.

"Waaaaaaah!"

"Whoa, don't cry, don't cry, don't cry!"

"I'm so glad... Why, why, when we met during the day, you weren't this badly injured!? Why are you always getting hurt, Ragna-san!"

"Well, even if you say that..." Ragna looked at Noel, who was shedding tears like rain while holding his hand tightly, and sighed, his shoulders drooping.

Then why are you always crying, or looking like you're about to cry? The exasperated words were rising up, but they disappeared somewhere along with his sigh.

(She cries like a kid.)

Her face was crumpled up, she awkwardly rubbed her eyes with the back of her hand, and her shoulders jumped with each sob.

"It can't be helped..." Saying that with a grimace, Ragna shook off Noel's hand and wiped away the tears that were falling in drops.

"Don't cry so much. Tears are falling."

"Waa... Yes, sorry... hiccup."

After one last big sob, Noel desperately wiped away her tears and slapped her cheeks a few times to stop the tears. The way she was unnaturally tightening her expression to avoid crying was comical, and Ragna burst out laughing with a wry smile.

"So? Where the hell is this? If you're here, is it something to do with the NOL?" For that matter, the treatment he was receiving was rather kind, Ragna thought, looking at himself still lying down.

His clothes had been taken off, and bandages and gauze were wrapped around his body as if to replace them. He wasn't sure where he had sustained each injury, but it seemed like all his wounds had been treated.

He didn't seem to be restrained in any way. Besides, the bed he was lying on wasn't a stiff, formal bed at all, but a cot made of gathered cloth, which made it clear that the NOL had little involvement.

"This is a Kaka clan village, Reaper-san."

It was a woman who had just entered the room who answered Ragna's question. Her black hair was tied up high, and she was wearing a long-hemmed red dress.

It was Litchi. She was carrying a bucket that served as a tray, and inside were a water pitcher and a cup. As Ragna saw Litchi place the bucket beside him, he was so surprised that his eyes widened and he jumped up.

"You... Ouch...!"

Instantly, such intense pain ran through him that his vision went white, and Ragna curled up on the bed as if hugging himself. His breathing became labored all at once, and cold sweat seeped out all over his body. His fingertips, clenched to endure the pain, trembled abnormally.

"Ragna-san!" Noel hurriedly tried to place her small hand on his shoulder, but hesitated at the last moment, worried that touching him would aggravate his wounds.

Beside them, Litchi chuckled wryly as she poured water from the pitcher into a cup from the bucket.

"I'm honored that you remember me, but you shouldn't move suddenly. Be aware that you're seriously injured. Even a bounty head is still human." Saying this, she offered Ragna a slightly dirty ceramic cup with a small chipped rim, which was probably something from the Kaka village.

Looking at it while suppressing his rough breathing, Ragna finally matched the memory with the woman in front of him.

He had seen her before in the sewers he had taken to get to the NOL's branch. She had suddenly interrupted when he was dealing with a monster that was like a mass of seithr. At that time, her nimble movements were far from what he would expect from a doctor.

"So... you really were a doctor, huh?" Muttering through the pain, Ragna took the offered cup with a still trembling hand.

At his glaring gaze and unexpectedly firm grip, Litchi sighed softly and asked, "Besides the pain from your injuries, is there anything else you're concerned about?"

"Why the hell are you guys here?"

"I was trying to ask about your condition, but... well, whatever." Seeing Ragna put the cup to his lips, Litchi smiled wryly at his suspicious look and took the cup back. She poured fresh water into it again. "Tao called me, saying you were in trouble and needed help."

Ragna also recognized the name Tao. Or rather, Taokaka, who had guided him through the sewers where he met Litchi.

"Tao, you don't mean..."

"Meow!!" Just as he was about to ask with a frown, the answer itself thrust its face into Ragna's field of vision. A large hood, a black face, red eyes, and a white mouth.

It seemed she had been hiding in the shadow of the bed, and now, with her large ears and long tail standing straight up, she leaned over Ragna, raising her hands to the ceiling and wiggling them.

"Good Guy, you fell from way up in the sky, meow. When Tao found you, you were all messed up and in pieces, meow."

The details aside, it was enough to roughly understand the situation. Ragna scratched his head while looking at Taokaka's cheerful face.

"I see. So... you, the first one to find me, brought me here, huh?"

"Meow!" A cheerful reply came back.

Ragna let out a deep breath. He dimly remembered being woken up by Taokaka once during the night. It seemed it hadn't been a dream.

Finally, he was getting used to the pain that ran through his whole body when he had gotten up. He looked down at his abdomen, which he had been holding, but no blood was seeping through the tightly wrapped bandages.

"So... Tao and the doctor are fine, but..." There was one person here who had no reason or necessity to be present, Ragna thought, moving his eyes to look at Noel.

Noel, who had made herself small and straightened her back, flinched and stiffened her shoulders as she answered.

"I, um... when I heard that Ragna-san was injured, I got worried..."

"Why the hell would you worry about me?" Ragna frowned, completely baffled. She had seemed quite indignant when he had driven her away in the mid-level park.

"Why, well..." Noel lowered her gaze and hesitated. She seemed to be struggling to find the right words to say, her fingers intertwined on her lap.

"You don't have to say it like that, you know? Noel-san stayed by your side all night, helping with your treatment," Litchi gently interjected from beside Noel. But at the same time, what she actually offered with her fingers was something else. A powder wrapped in white paper. "Here, pain reliever and medicine to prevent inflammation. Drink this."

Clicking his tongue softly, Ragna took it. Litchi's scolding tone made him feel awkward, and he roughly poured the medicine into his mouth and swallowed it with water. It was terribly bitter.

"None of your business." He replied dismissively and returned the medicine packet and the cup. Taking them, Litchi narrowed her eyes and smiled.

"You're surprisingly childish, aren't you?"

"What!" Ragna leaned forward as if to snap at Litchi, who had folded the medicine wrapper and stood up beautifully. But he couldn't move any further. The intense pain that ran through him stiffened not only his body but even Ragna's words.

Looking down at Ragna, who was writhing in silent agony, and Noel, who was worried about him, Litchi raised her index finger with a doctor's face.

"You have a large laceration in your abdomen, lacerations all over your body, as well as bruises from falling from a high place, and fractures in your leg and shoulder. If I were to list the minor

ones, it would never end. It will probably take a while before you can move around, so until then, you need to rest. Understood?"

Leaving those words behind, Litchi turned on her heel. She was about to leave the room when... she hesitated, her toes pausing, and glanced back at Ragna over her shoulder, as if stealing a look.

Although she had told him to rest, Ragna's injuries were healing at an abnormal rate.

When Litchi had first examined him, he was in a state where he probably wouldn't regain consciousness for several days, but he had already managed to sit up in about half a day since then.

The scrapes all over his body from the fall had completely disappeared overnight. Even the bones that had been shattered were starting to knit together. At this rate, it would probably only take two or three days before he could walk again.

This was impossible for an ordinary person. It was his unique healing ability, something that human wisdom could not create.

Litchi remembered Ragna's right arm that she had seen during the treatment. Although it was wrapped in bandages now, an inhuman jet-black arm extended from his shoulder.

Perhaps... that was the source of his extraordinary healing power - the Azure Grimoire.

"Azure... Grimoire..."

Litchi, who had unknowingly muttered to herself, gasped and looked up at the voice that suddenly interrupted her thoughts.

A single Kaka girl, dressed in black, stood leaning leisurely against the doorway of the room where Ragna was lying. As before, there was no human face inside the deeply pulled-down hood, just a black face with red eyes and a white mouth, like a mask. Her wild, unruly hair that flowed down her back was a striking orange color.

"You are..." Litchi knew her face. And more than anyone, it was a familiar face to Taokaka.

"Sis Tora, meow!!!"

"Gweh!" Taokaka sprang from Ragna's stomach, raising both hands in excitement. Ignoring Ragna, who had been lightly trampled in the process, Taokaka bounded over to the other Kaka who was standing at the entrance.

"Sis Tora, Sis Tora! When did you get back, meow!?"

"Hey Tao, treat the injured person gently, meow. And I just got back, meow." Compared to Taokaka's innocent and unrestrained attitude and tone, the Kaka called Tora had a calm and mature air.

While gently patting the head of the affectionate Taokaka, the black-clothed Kaka turned to face Ragna. Her expression was the same as Taokaka's, just simple eyes and a mouth. Nevertheless, Ragna felt a sense of thoughtfulness there, and the gaze directed at him made him grimace with a strange feeling.

"Long time no see, Ragna. You've grown up so much, meow."

"Who the hell are you?" He had been asking questions ever since he woke up. Ragna was getting fed up with being the only one who didn't understand what was going on. He looked up at the new arrival.

"I'm Torakaka. I've met you once before, meow. Although, it was a long time ago, meow." Saying so, Torakaka smiled, her mouth forming a crescent shape under her hood.

Ragna groaned bitterly internally. As she pointed out, he didn't remember at all. It wasn't impossible to believe they had met, but he'd have no idea if asked when, where, and how.

(Again... it's all things I don't understand.)

Whether it was the medicine or the fever from his injuries, Ragna thought groggily. He had no idea about his connection with Torakaka, and he couldn't say he understood the situation here either.

Litchi was a doctor, so he understood the logic of Taokaka going to call her. But what about Noel? Why was she here, and on top of that, why was she taking care of him?

(My head hurts...)

It doesn't matter who's connected to who. Ragna told himself inwardly and gave up on thinking. A deep sigh escaped him naturally, and his bandaged chest rose and fell heavily.

"Ragna-san?" Noel peered in, asking if something was wrong. When Ragna looked, those green eyes were filled with worry. Ragna shook his head.

"It's nothing. It's just... well..." His head was so busy it felt like it was spinning. Just as Ragna rubbed his head, the excited Taokaka came flying in with a flip.

"Yay! Sis Tora is back, meow~! There's Good Guy and Boobie Lady, too. Today is the best, meow!" She kicked off the wall and jumped up, did a flip, and landed lightly.

"Ooh-hoh!"

Her feet used Ragna's stomach as a springboard, sending her all the way to the ceiling, and she dashed around the room.

"Kya-hoo!"

"Ragna-san, Ragna-san!?" In Ragna's vision, flipped upside down from the impact, were the bullet-like afterimages of Taokaka running around with wild abandon, and Noel's pale, contorted face. Behind him, he could hear the flustered voices of Litchi and Torakaka.

But soon, those things faded into darkness as if the world had turned upside down, and faded from Ragna's consciousness.

No, it was Ragna's consciousness itself that was fading.

Feeling his head drop limply, as if from a distant place, Ragna thought with a sense of understanding in the corner of his rapidly fading consciousness.

This time, he might really be dead...

5

January 2, 2200 - 11:45

The sound of hard boots treading on dry dirt echoed, crunching the sand.

This was the second time he had walked this road. Four days ago, he had climbed this gentle slope. Now he was climbing the same slope, in the same way.

The outskirts of Kagutsuchi, Ronin-Gai, which Jin had finally reached after walking all night, had changed somewhat from when he had passed through four days ago.

Typical of the lower outskirts, the haphazard scenery remained the same, with improperly maintained roads and exposed dirt. But here and there, buildings leaned crookedly or had completely collapsed, exposing their dilapidated state.

The cause was the explosion at the NOL's underground facility last night. The strong tremors underground swept through the entire residential district, rendering useless the simple structures that had been built as temporary shelters.

But Jin forgot such differences in a moment and kept moving forward.

His steps were a little unsteady compared to last night. Although they were properly treated, he had continued walking all night with serious injuries. The physical burden was considerable. But the decision to stop had not been made by the time he arrived here.

Jin, occasionally stumbling and disrupting his pace, was heading towards the interior of Kagutsuchi, just like four days ago. However, unlike that time, his destination was not the NOL's branch.

He had no more business there. He didn't know where he was now, but he was looking for Ragna, his brother, who was probably still in Kagutsuchi...

(Kill him.)

Jin clenched his teeth tightly, as if to suppress the emotion welling up from within.

This was it. What Jubei had been talking about. That is, who wanted to kill Ragna the Bloodedge. Was it Jin Kisaragi, or the ice sword Yukianesa?

(Killing my brother... is my job. Only I can...)

It's okay to kill him. I can kill him. I should kill him, I have to kill him.

Why do I think that? What makes me think that?

Frowning at the swirling thoughts, Jin unconsciously tightened his grip on the sword's sheath.

(Foolish. Am I really going to swallow the words of a man named Jubei? Ridiculous... ridiculous.)

Even as he tried to admonish himself, his mind, clouded with fatigue, wouldn't stop thinking uselessly. The voice of the beastkin, telling him to think, seemed to urge him persistently.

(Yukianesa... the Power of Order...)

If, just if, Jubei's words were true without any exaggeration, and if, as Jubei pointed out, all the killing intent Jin directed at Ragna was due to Yukianesa...

(If that's the case... what does it mean? Doesn't it still mean that I want to kill my brother...?)

He didn't know when it had appeared, but a single drop of sweat traced a path down his cheek and fell from his chin. It wasn't hot. Just... burning.

His shoulder, held in place by bandages, and his ribs creaked with every step. His fever seemed to have risen considerably. He had been using Yukianesa to cool his body down to its limit to

deceive himself, but perhaps because his physical strength was depleted, he could no longer control it.

Even so, unable to stop, Jin continued down the dirt road. There should be a long bridge ahead. If he crossed it, he would soon leave Ronin-Gai.

Wiping away the unpleasant sweat, he pushed back the fallen bangs. From behind Jin, three whistling sounds flew towards him. They were accompanied by killing intent, and aimed for his neck.

"Damn!" Jin quickly twisted his body and swung the drawn Yukianesa at the approaching whistling sounds. A high-pitched metallic sound rang out, and the three approaching killing intents fell to the ground.

Jin recognized their true nature. Black daggers. Ikaruga's kunai.

He had expected them to come, of course. And just as expected, the killing intent that suddenly appeared above Jin's head descended like a shadow.

"Prepare yourself!" A thick voice, filled with anger, approached, swirling the wind with thick seithr.

Jin looked up and braced himself, using his sword as a shield.

Against the blue sky, a large man in green armor raised his hand to strike Jin's neck. His gleaming eyes were dazzling. The man's hand strike was deflected by Jin's Yukianesa. But before landing, he twisted his body in mid-air and quickly launched a kick from the same height.

Jin kicked off the ground and jumped back. However, his foot stumbled midway, and he fell backward onto the ground.

"Ugh..." He failed to break his fall, and the impact struck the broken bones in his back. He couldn't exhale the trapped breath, and his throat coughed awkwardly. He caught sight of the man once again, holding a kunai. Rolling away to avoid the thrown blade, Jin used his sword as a cane to stand up.

"Ugh..."

A fresh pain shot through his right shoulder. A kunai had grazed him.

Shaking the sand from his hair to clear his vision, Jin sheathed Yukianesa again, assumed an iaido stance, and glared at the man facing him.

"You again..."

Standing in Jin's line of sight was a man with a red cloth wrapped around his neck like a muffler, a rough appearance, and a cross-shaped scar etched on his face. It was Bang Shishigami, the ninja of Ikaruga.

"Jin Kisaragi, you! To set foot in this Ronin-Gai not once, but twice... do you intend to insult us, the people of Ikaruga?! Or have you come to mock me for my defeat?!" Bang's voice vibrated the air as he pointed and shouted, his legs wide apart in a ready stance.

It was a voice that seemed to resonate even in his head. Jin's gaze sharpened, and he returned the words with a piercing coldness, pretending to be calm.

"I told you before. If you don't want to be killed, don't get in my way." He didn't have the time to be held up in a place like this, nor did he intend to humor this man. He wanted to leave this troublesome place as soon as possible.

But Bang, glaring back at Jin, wore an expression of seething anger, burning with hostility that suggested he wouldn't let Jin escape unharmed.

"Silence, silence! Don't tell me you're under the illusion that you stand above us, the people of Ikaruga. It's true that we lost to you. But that doesn't mean we submitted to the Librarium, let alone bowed down to you personally!" His voice, like a slam, violently shook Jin's eardrums. Even though he wasn't that close, the pressure made him dizzy.

Changing the finger he had been pointing at Jin into a hand blade, Bang deeply lowered his stance, holding it at his waist.

"And above all, I haven't forgotten the wounds I received the other day!!" As soon as he roared, Bang dashed forward like a whirlwind. His speed was fast and light, contrary to his muscular build.

"Tch, so noisy..." To counter the approaching ninja in one breath, Jin grasped the hilt of Yukianesa, which he had been holding.

Ikaruga. The land of the ended Great War.

There, Jin was put in charge of a unit, stormed the headquarters of the Ikaruga rebel army, and killed the supreme commander Tenjo, who was at the very end. With that, the civil war finally ended, and Ikaruga was completely brought back under the control of the NOL.

The sounds, smells, and tastes of that war flooded back into his brain and hands.

Soldiers rushing to their deaths, brandishing their loyalty, civil officials fleeing in confusion while screaming something, men, women, young, old.

Everyone, everyone, everything that came into view...

Kill.

Jin felt his heart pound heavily. A chill of elation ran up his spine.

Kill.

Kill everyone.

Cut down and kill everyone who stands in your way.

That feeling was now a voice of temptation. As if it were a sweet act, a just liberation, it tempted, invited, and dragged him in. Pulling him close, embracing him, pushing him out.

Kill.

"Jin Kisaragiiiiiiii!"

In the blink of an eye, Bang's hand blade was before him. The moment it entered his vision, Jin's hand moved. He pulled the hilt, drew the sword, and deflected Bang's thrusting arm. He had intended to slash it away, but it was blocked by Bang's sturdy gauntlet. Raising the sword that had been repelled with a dull metallic sound, Jin swung it down in a vertical line.

"Hah!"

"What?"

Bang had sandwiched the blade between his hands, stopping the slash by a hair's breadth.

Strength competitions were not Jin's hobby. Jin thrust his knee into Bang's abdomen, as if burying it there.

"Gah!" Bang staggered back, letting out a muffled sound. Watching him through the silver arc of the sword he had swung away, Jin's lips curled into a smile.

"Hah...!" The breath he exhaled was filled with exhilaration. It was a close call. If this ninja's reflexes had been just a little slower, a bisected, gruesome figure would be lying there now.

Thinking that far, Jin's smile vanished from his face as if it had been sucked away. His face tightened, and his spine froze.

He had found it. This was it. Just now, there was definitely a voice that had tempted him. He had sensed some kind of consciousness. Something else, not himself.

The moment he realized that, his thoughts rapidly became unfocused, and his breathing became ragged.

"Hah... hah... ugh..." A terrible dizziness and an unresponsive body made his footing unsteady, and he was about to fall. Jin instinctively dropped the scabbard and pressed his hand to his head.

Kill.

Killkillkillkillkillkillkill.

(No... this is wrong. Is this really my voice? This is... this voice is... ah.)

He didn't want to admit it. He didn't want to look at it directly. He didn't want to turn around. Once he became aware of it, the sensation was undeniable. It came crawling up, transmitted from him gripping Yukianesa.

Don't be dragged along by Yukianesa, the beastkin had said in a stern tone. Jubei's words came back to him.

(I am...)

The sword slipped from his other hand as well, and the Yukianesa that had fallen to the ground disappeared from that spot. If its master desired it, the Nox Nyctores would always return to his hand. But Jin, who was clutching his head with his empty hand and gasping for breath, made no attempt to summon Yukianesa.

His consciousness began to cloud, and the strength left his body. It was as if a consciousness that wasn't his own was trying to take over Jin.

"What's wrong with you? Something seems off..." Bang, bewildered by Jin's abnormality, involuntarily lowered his stance. Jin, hunched over with ragged breaths and staggered on unsteady feet, looked utterly bizarre. That bizarreness calmed Bang's bloodied head.

"Jin Kisaragi!!" He called out in that same slamming voice.

Jin looked at Bang through the fingers covering his face. A murky killing intent floated in his sharp eyes, and he looked as if he would leap at Bang and cut off his head at any moment. But Jin's feet didn't kick off the ground. Instead, he finally collapsed as if giving in, and fell to the ground.

"Damn it..."

What a sight, Jin thought inwardly, despising himself. Dropping his weapon in front of an enemy, unable to even stand. And to make matters worse... he was about to lose consciousness.

But he couldn't resist the dragging sensation. Jin felt himself tilt sharply and lost consciousness as if his string had been cut. He fell forward, collapsing onto the hard earth.

From Bang's perspective, it was an unbelievable sight. The Hero of Ikaruga, falling in front of his enemy.

"Could it be..." Bang, who had been glaring at the fallen, hateful figure, finally realized and raised an eyebrow. Even Jin Kisaragi, a hero and a killer, was still just a human. His appearance just now didn't seem to be in peak condition at all.

He hadn't noticed while they were facing each other, but perhaps he had suffered severe injuries. If so, there would never be a better opportunity to inflict the desired punishment on the man who had destroyed his homeland.

Bang paused for a moment, as if pondering, then tightened his expression and stepped towards Jin.

But at that moment, a figure suddenly jumped out from the shadows and stood in front of Bang, blocking his path.

"Don't come any closer."

Standing with her arms spread wide, as if to protect Jin, was a female guardian. However, the clothes she wore were not the blue of a regular guardian, but black.

"You are...!?!" Bang's eyes widened in surprise at the intruder. Not only had he felt no sign of her presence until now, but he was also captivated by her appearance.

She was a young woman with a firm body. But her eyes were more like those of a small animal than a human, and a thick, large brown tail peeked out from under her wide poncho. It was a squirrel's tail.

Looking straight at Bang without the slightest fear, the female soldier with the squirrel's tail declared firmly, while using her whole body as a shield for Jin.

"If you try to lay a hand on Kisaragi-senpai, you'll have to deal with me!"

It was Makoto Nanaya who declared this with authority.

Chapter 4: Sister's illusion — Vestiges

1

January 2, 2200 - 12:32

Steam rose in white wisps from the simple earthenware teacup.

The tea inside was green, and she had heard it was something that had been familiar and drunk in Ikaruga since ancient times. When she sniffed it, a faintly sweet and rich aroma stimulated her nostrils.

Taking a sip of the tea, Makoto placed the teacup back on the table and began with a wry smile.

"Sorry for being so cheeky earlier, Bang-san."

Makoto was in the living room of Bang's house, which was built in the Ikaruga style, with a wooden floor, large windows, and sliding doors.

Across the wooden table, Bang sat with a similarly simple teacup in front of him, his expression softened into a wry smile as well.

"What nonsense, worrying about a comrade is natural for anyone. You don't need to worry about it."

"And you've even let me stay at your house. I don't know how to thank you."

"Hahahaha, we help each other out in times of trouble. Don't hesitate!" Bang opened his mouth wide, laughed heartily, and brought the teacup to his lips.

Like the other houses in Ronin-Gai, Bang's house, built as if jutting out from a steep cliff face, wasn't particularly large, but it was a comfortable place where the outside wind and sunlight streamed in through the large, open windows.

Unlike the upper floors, which almost perfectly blocked out seithr, the wind and air here contained some seithr, but for Makoto, a beastkin who was originally more resistant to seithr than humans, it was nothing.

Rather, the smell of earth mixed in with the wind blowing through the room was refreshing. Makoto preferred the view from the window here, which showed the sky and the distant scenery, to the view from the upper floors.

Turning her face away from the window and back to Bang, Makoto's eyes clouded slightly as if she found it a little difficult to say.

"But really, thank you... even though both Kisaragi-senpai and I are members of the NOL."

Jin was currently sleeping in the next room. Bang himself had carried him all the way here and even arranged for his wounds to be treated.

Fortunately, or perhaps unfortunately, the main reason Jin had collapsed was due to a high fever caused by his injuries, and he didn't immediately require the most advanced medical technology. So even in Ronin-Gai, the necessary treatment could be adequately performed.

Yes, the person who treated him was also a resident of Ronin-Gai.

That was what made Makoto feel so uncomfortable, and she gripped the teacup in her hands tightly.

Ronin-Gai was a town inhabited by the survivors of the Ikaruga Federation, which had raised the banner of rebellion against the NOL and started the Ikaruga Civil War that began nine years ago and ended two and a half years ago.

Until two and a half years ago, they and the NOL had been at war. Simply put, they were enemies. And when the civil war ended, the NOL took everything from the people of Ikaruga. The town was destroyed, the leaders were killed. Makoto had even heard that there had been a sweeping operation to eliminate the residents.

The people living here were all those who had desperately escaped the NOL's ruthlessness. What must they have felt, helping a soldier of the NOL, especially Jin Kisaragi, the "Hero of Ikaruga" who had killed Tenjo, the lord of the Ikaruga Federation?

Noticing Makoto's tightened lips and clenched teeth, Bang put his hand to his forehead and let out a low groan.

"Hmph... I, too, hate the NOL, you know."

"Yeah. I think that's natural."

During the Ikaruga Civil War, Makoto was still a student at the military academy and wasn't even a soldier, let alone in the Intelligence Department. After graduating and joining the Intelligence Department, and coming into contact with the documents from the Ikaruga Civil War, she often felt that things didn't have to go that far.

It might be strange for Makoto, who hadn't participated in the civil war, to say this, but even so, there were several descriptions in the wartime records that made her question things.

Despite this, Bang, who was also a victim of that treatment, crossed his arms and shook his head.

"But my hatred for the NOL is a separate matter from this. If there is someone injured and fallen before my eyes, I cannot abandon them, no matter who they are. Especially to try to sneak up and kill them in their sleep, that would be beneath any Ikaruga man."

Crossing his thick arms, Bang nodded to himself several times, as if agreeing with his own words. His tone was not bitter at all, but rather very straightforward. Makoto gasped at Bang's words and looked up. The question came out of her mouth reflexively.

"Even if it's the person who took away your homeland?"

"Of course." Bang replied without a second's hesitation.

Makoto felt a tightness in her throat. She was genuinely surprised that there were people who could say such a thing.

It had only been a little over two years since the end of the civil war. It was too soon to forget. Perhaps this man in ninja attire was simply foolish. But even if that were the case, Makoto felt a very simple liking for Bang as a person.

"Bang-san, you're so cool... I'm surprised."

"Wahahaha, well, I wouldn't go that far!"

With an expression that showed he wasn't displeased, Bang exaggeratedly put his hand to his head.

Even from such small gestures, it was clear. This person was a very 'good person'. That's what her intuition told her.

That's why she had to say it to this person, Makoto thought, straightening herself on the seemingly handmade chair.

"Bang-san. I know saying this won't change anything, and it might just hurt your feelings. But... I want to apologize." Looking down at her uniform for a moment, Makoto raised her chin. She looked at Bang, her nut-like eyes filled with sincerity. "I'm sorry for hurting you."

Makoto was just an intelligence officer. Her rank was lieutenant, and she didn't have any special authority. But as someone who wore this uniform, she couldn't help but say something.

Taken aback by the unexpected words, Bang raised his thick eyebrows and looked back at Makoto with a blank expression. But then he understood their meaning and grinned contentedly.

"You're a good kid, you know."

"A good kid?" She hadn't expected those words at all. Flustered, Makoto carefully composed, sincere expression crumbled.

"Indeed! I might even take you on as my disciple!" Bang puffed out his thick chest and laughed heartily, then took a drink of his tea in high spirits.

Although his tone was joking, Makoto saw a serious light in his eyes and hurriedly shook her head.

"N-no! I'm fine, thank you!"

"Come now, don't say that. This ninja of Ikaruga, the warrior of love and justice, Bang Shishigami, will train you thoroughly!"

"I don't need it! Besides, I'm not interested in ninjas or anything like that!" As Bang leaned forward, Makoto leaned back.

He was a good person... but this forceful, pushy strength of his was, to be honest, a bit troublesome.

Adding a note about Bang's personality to the memo in her head as an intelligence officer, Makoto thought of her friend in the corner of her mind.

Noel had probably already arrived at the Orient Town, which was the designated meeting place. But she couldn't move Jin right away. He would probably say he was fine once he woke up, but they couldn't afford to mess up anything from here on out. At least until his condition stabilized a little more.

(Sorry, Noel-un... please wait a little longer.)

Her reunion with her best friend would have to wait a little longer. Apologizing in her heart, Makoto took another sip of the slightly lukewarm tea.

2

The two voices coming from the next room reached Jin's ears, quite noisily.

In the bedroom, where sunlight and the seithr-smelling wind streamed in generously from the large window, Jin leaned silently against the wall, listening to Makoto and Bang's conversation.

Both Makoto and Bang were cautious and alert to any signs, but perhaps they were distracted or engrossed in their conversation, as they didn't notice that Jin had woken up or left the bed.

At first, the conversation revolved around the NOL and the Ikaruga Civil War, but eventually, the two changed the topic to unrelated, ordinary small talk. Once that happened, Jin lost interest and quietly pushed himself away from the wall. He didn't reach for his uniform jacket that was placed on the bed, and carefully left the room, making sure the heels of his hard boots didn't make a sound. He didn't know the layout of the house, but walking along the hallway that followed, he was able to exit from what seemed like a back door.

The sky still looked like daytime, and he looked down at the distant lower levels. He wondered how long he had been asleep, but judging from the content of the conversation coming from the next room and the state of the sky, it had probably only been about an hour.

Without any particular thought, Jin took a step forward and filled his lungs with air.

(The seithr is dense.)

It was poor quality air, unlike the upper levels. But the wind was cool, and it felt good on his cheeks, which were flushed with fever.

When he first woke up, he was panicked because he couldn't understand his situation at all. But once he understood that this was Ronin-Gai from the style of the house, and from the voices and conversation in the next room that he had been saved by Makoto and Bang... a sigh escaped him at the overwhelming feeling of wretchedness.

He had passed out and collapsed.

He had overexerted his injured body, developed a fever, and on top of that, succumbed to Yukianesa's mental interference, collapsing wretchedly in front of the person he had threatened to kill.

It was humiliating. Both that he hadn't been able to calmly assess his own condition, and that he hadn't been able to control Yukianesa... and above all, that he was clearly being influenced by Yukianesa's interference.

(Back then, who was it that wanted to kill that man?)

As if to confirm something, Jin looked at his own palm. His gloves, which had probably been taken off during his care, were still on the bed with his jacket, so Jin was currently barehanded. Had this hand desired to grip the sword? Or had the sword desired to be gripped by this hand?

Jin already knew the answer. He hated being disturbed. But he didn't enjoy killing people.

The one who had wanted to kill the man named Bang Shishigami back then... was Yukianesa.

No, the killing intent itself probably welled up from within Jin. A sword is a weapon, Yukianesa is a weapon. Weapons and arms wouldn't harbor emotions. So, to be precise, it was Yukianesa that caused the killing intent to be born within Jin.

(Have I been dragged along by Yukianesa all this time? Has my mind been controlled by a Nox Nyctores?)

The answer was yes. He already knew.

"Ugh!" Clenching his open hand tightly, Jin bitterly grit his teeth.

Then what about Ragna the Bloodedge? He wanted to kill his brother. He had come all the way to Kagutsuchi driven by that impulse. What was the source of this impulse, this yearning, this killing intent?

(Think...)

He had to think, and then he had to know.

What was it that he was seeking? How much of it was due to Yukianesa, and how much of it was something he had truly created himself? And beyond that, was there really such a thing as the "Power of Order"?

Without him realizing it, the feet that had been moving aimlessly and recklessly had brought Jin close to the bridge he had frozen four days ago.

The bridge was built over a deep crack that ran through the hard rock foundation. The view of Ronin-Gai from there was chaotic and unstable, yet it spread out with a unique brilliance. Like a wild grass.

"It's not admirable to make your juniors worry unnecessarily, Jin Kisaragi." Suddenly called by a voice, Jin slid his gaze and looked in that direction. As expected, the unwelcome voice that interrupted his thoughts belonged to Bang Shishigami.

"...It's none of your business." Jin replied coldly, trying to remain calm. At the same time, he felt a chilling, glaring emotion stir within his chest.

(This is it...)

Yukianesa wasn't in his hand right now. But the Nox Nyctores, deeply connected to his mind, constantly interfered with its user. And through that interference, the sword was tempting Jin. Kill, it said.

Once he understood and became aware of it, it was easy to recognize its presence. The problem was what came after. It was as if he was being pulled by a rope. He felt dizzy.

Unaware that Jin was secretly biting his lip, Bang took a large step forward and, pointing his index finger, raised his voice loudly, echoing throughout the area.

"What are you saying? Makoto Nanaya is a dutiful girl who jumped in front of me without regard for danger, and tried to protect you with her own body! To add to such a burden on Makoto-dono, even if the sun god overlooks it, this ninja of love and justice, Bang Shishigami, will not allow it!!"

"What a noisy man..." Jin spat out the words in disgust and covered his ears, which were ringing from the shout.

But right now, this man's noisy voice, which was disturbing his nerves, was also a help. It was shaking his mind, which was about to be dragged by Yukianesa, in a truly reckless way.

"It's not like I'm going to disappear like this. I can't stand the fact that I'm in your care, but... I understand that she helped me, and I don't look down on her so much that I don't feel any obligation for that."

Perhaps it was the fever, but his mouth was running on about unnecessary things. But it was easier to talk. If he remained silent and concentrated, he might be swept away by Yukianesa.

"Besides, in this condition, I can't even handle a sword properly. I'm aware that I'm not in a state where I can push myself." Jin sighed, as if spitting out the words. Even so, this clinging lethargy was annoying.

Bang crossed his arms and nodded deeply, as if convinced.

"Hmm, if that's the case, then it's fine. Now then, if you understand, hurry back to your room. Makoto-dono was very worried, you know. If you stay in a place with such strong winds, your fever will only get worse..."

Turning his back with an attitude that was hard to believe was the same person who had just been scattering killing intent and throwing kunai, Bang started walking, urging him along. Stopping his continuing nagging and his feet, Jin called out to Bang's back.

"Let me ask you one thing."

Bang turned around, looking puzzled.

"Why did you help me?"

Jin understood why Makoto would help him. As Bang said, she was dutiful. She wasn't the kind of person who would abandon someone she had spent even a little time with back in the military academy days and disappear somewhere.

But Bang was different. For Jin, Bang wasn't someone he had to direct killing intent towards, but for Bang, Jin was someone he should direct killing intent towards.

"Makoto-dono asked me something similar... but if someone is collapsed on the roadside, it's the way of an Ikaruga man to help them, no matter who they are."

"Don't you hate me?" As he asked, Jin was disgusted at himself for asking such a pointless question. He knew the answer. But that was precisely why he also wanted to hear the response from Bang's own mouth.

Bang's words came back immediately, straight and to the point.

"Of course I hate you." True to his words, Bang's gaze held an intense light, completely changing his previously somewhat detached demeanor. His voice, lowered as if suppressing a shout, was uncharacteristically heavy, and therefore had an unexpected sincerity. "I want to cut off your head right now. ...But I don't think that would atone for my sins."

Jin frowned at the word "sins." It was like this man to question the sins of others, but he hadn't expected him to talk about the sins he had imposed on himself.

Bang also frowned, his face contorted. That severity, like the word "sins" he had uttered, was directed at himself.

"I could not protect my lord, Emperor Tenjo. It was to protect the people of Ikaruga, but even so, I left His Majesty on the battlefield at that time." Bang held a position of leadership among the ninja of Ikaruga. His lord, Tenjo, placed great trust in him, and when it was clear that the end was near, he directly entrusted the future of the people to Bang.

It was his final order. He couldn't disobey it, and he had to fulfill the trust placed in him.

But even so, more than two years after the end of the civil war, he would think back, wondering if he could have found an opening to let his lord escape if he had been by his side then. At the very least, he wouldn't have let his lord die alone.

"His Majesty's death was not because of the civil war, nor the NOL, nor the 'Hero of Ikaruga.' ... It was because I was weak." As if grasping that feeling of powerlessness, Bang made a tight fist with his large, sunburnt hand. His fist trembled slightly from the force he exerted. But that didn't last long, and Bang let out a deep breath, his chest rising and falling.

"...I refuse to lose myself in hatred and lose my pride as a citizen of Ikaruga. I must be strong. So that I can protect the many people living in Ronin-Gai. That's why I cooperated with Makoto-dono, and that's why I helped you."

Bang gently loosened his fist, as if to say that helplessness wasn't the only thing in his hands now.

Jin stared at him with eyes as sharp as ice blades, melting the words he had heard one by one within himself.

Losing oneself and losing pride. That struck Jin deeply. Just now, in this very place, he had swung Yukianesa impulsively, trying to kill Bang. Wasn't that exactly what he had looked like? It was infuriating. Truly infuriating, but... he agreed with Bang on that one point alone: he couldn't allow himself to lose his pride.

"Hmm?" Suddenly, Bang looked up and turned his head in an unexpected direction. At the same time, Jin also turned his attention there.

Small footsteps were approaching. Soon, their source emerged from a narrow alley onto the street, and upon finding Bang, they ran straight towards him.

"Bang-sama!"

"Bang-sama~"

Two young girls appeared. One was a child who looked more like a toddler, not even two or three years old, and the other was a relatively sturdy child of about six or seven. They seemed to be sisters, wearing matching patterned kimonos. Their straight hair reaching down their backs and their drooping eyes were very similar.

Welcoming the sisters who ran to his feet, Bang crouched down. By then, the stern look he had had just moments before was nowhere to be seen.

"Oh, what is it? Hmm, there's a delicious smell..."

"Mommy said, she made a lot of pickles, so bring some to Bang-san."

"Please~"

Saying so, the young sisters offered Bang a jar that was small enough for even a child to carry. Accepting the jar from the girl who looked up at him with a cheerful smile, Bang stroked the sisters' heads with his rough hand.

"This is much appreciated. Your mother is a master of pickling. I'll have some tonight. Would you tell your mother that Bang said thank you?"

"Yes, I understand!"

"Understood~"

The older sister raised her hand and replied energetically, and the younger sister imitated her. Jin stood there dumbfounded at the bewilderingly peaceful scene.

He remembered a girl who had given him such a carefree smile a long time ago.

How many years ago was it when they first met? When everything around him was cold and he felt like he was freezing, even as a child. He remembered the warmth of that girl's hand, which was the only warmth he felt.

"Brother."

How many times had he turned around at that voice calling him?

He wondered what she was doing now. If she saw him now, she would surely turn pale and force him into bed. She might even cry, telling him not to push himself. A gentle and caring girl, sometimes stubborn and terribly serious, with the name of a flower.

(...Nonsense.)

Now wasn't the time to be reminiscing about such things.

Telling himself that, Jin shook off the thoughts that had visited his heart like the scent of a flower, turned his back on the young sisters, and walked quickly towards Bang's house.

3

January 2, 2200 - 14:45

A song could be heard.

It was a nostalgic song. One he had often heard when he was still small. The soft melody and gentle tempo were comforting. Yes, he often used to fall asleep listening to this song. With his younger brother and sister, the three of them, listening to the sister's song.

As if tracing the nostalgic sound, Ragna gently raised his eyelids. The scenery he saw was almost unchanged from before he fell asleep. A ceiling made of mismatched planks and roughly

finished stone walls. Beneath him was a bed that was surprisingly comfortable despite its simple appearance. And at the edge of his vision, the blue and white uniform.

(Noel...?)

Following the singing, he found Noel there. Her long golden hair flowed down her back, and she was humming the song, her lips curving into a cheerful smile.

(Again...)

At that sight, Ragna momentarily lost the distinction between dream and reality. It was the same when he woke up here before. The presence, the figure that had stayed by his bedside the whole time... he had mistaken it for his sister.

He calmed down when he realized it was someone else, but the resemblance to his sister gave him a brief taste of the warm, innocent time and atmosphere of his childhood. Something he had now lost. It wasn't an unpleasant feeling at all.

"...That song."

"Eh? W-whoa, Ragna-san!?" Muttering with a hoarse voice from sleep, Noel stopped singing and jumped up, startled. She hurriedly covered her mouth, her eyes wide as she stared intently at Ragna. "Y-you were awake... um, just now... did you hear that?"

"I heard it."

Noel must have thought he wouldn't wake up for a while longer. As Ragna nodded, rubbing his forehead as if to wipe away the drowsiness, Noel's face turned bright red all the way to her ears.

Perhaps she hadn't realized he was listening to her sing. Ragna sighed inwardly, thinking she was hopelessly clueless. Then he asked again.

"Where did you learn that song?"

"Ah... um, where was it... I'm sorry, I don't really know. Somehow, I just sing it unconsciously before going to sleep. Was it a song you knew, by any chance?" Her apologetic expression suddenly shifted to one of curiosity as she tilted her head at Ragna.

Looking up at Noel, who had sat down directly on the floor and was peering at him, Ragna nodded slightly.

"Yeah. A long time ago... when I was a kid, the sister who took care of me used to sing it often." Just as Noel hummed it before sleeping, Ragna had listened to it as a lullaby. He was more on

the side of being a good sleeper, and he wasn't particularly interested in lullabies themselves, so he didn't remember the lyrics very well, but the simple melody had stuck in his ears.

"What an amazing coincidence. Hehe." Noel narrowed her eyes and smiled happily. Amused by her innocent joy, and at the same time feeling just as envious, Ragna's lips softened into a smile.

"Yeah, it is. I never thought I'd hear it in a place like this."

It was truly a strange coincidence.

Closing his eyelids, it was as if he could recall his childhood bedroom. It was a memory so distant and fragile that it seemed like it would vanish with a breath.

"Oh, then Ragna-san, do you know anything about this song? Like where it came from, or who wrote it?" Leaning forward slightly, Noel asked with a hint of expectation. But Ragna shook his head. It was a little awkward to deny her when she looked at him like that.

"Nah, I don't know. I always thought that song was the sister's original, anyway." The sister was someone who would come up with all sorts of strange songs when she was in a good mood. So he had always thought that the lullaby he heard repeatedly was probably one of those. He was actually surprised that this melody existed outside of that church.

"I see..."

Small expectations turned into small disappointment, and Noel's eyebrows dropped. Then, suddenly realizing something, Noel picked up a glass placed in the corner of the room. She poured water from a pitcher and offered it to Ragna.

Dragging himself up, Ragna wordlessly sat up. His body felt heavy. But the pain was significantly less than it had been yesterday when he first woke up here.

He took the glass and drank the water.

While waiting for Ragna to return the glass, Noel began to speak in a low voice.

"I... I don't have any memories from when I was little. Do you know about the big explosion that happened in Ibukido about six years ago? Apparently, I was caught up in that accident, and my current parents took me in after I was all alone."

As Noel continued, unsure of what kind of face she should make, Ragna returned the glass, having drunk about half of it. Taking it with both hands, as if it were something fragile, Noel gently placed the glass back where it had been. With her body twisted as if looking back over her shoulder, she lowered her chin, as if reminiscing.

"I don't even remember where I lived or what kind of life I had, or even my name. But I could sing this song, even though no one taught it to me." Saying that, Noel placed her hand on her chest. It was as if carefully keeping a song that clung to the edge of a memory that couldn't even be called a memory.

What should he say to her in a situation like this? Ragna couldn't think of anything to say right away and grimaced. He wasn't good at these kinds of topics.

Noticing Ragna's reaction, Noel raised her shoulders and waved her hands busily, looking embarrassed.

"S-sorry, I don't know why I'm talking about this on my own, it must be bothering you."

"No... me too." Ragna closed his mouth once at the words that had slipped out. He was amazed at himself for trying to talk about something like this. But... he quickly decided it didn't matter and put his pointless stubbornness aside.

"I don't know what my birth parents looked like either. I don't remember much from when I was a kid, but when I came to, I was living in a remote rural church. Just me, my younger brother and sister, and the church sister, the four of us." He had thought talking about his background was foolish. But Noel straightened up and listened attentively to Ragna's impulsive story.

"So you were an orphan too, Ragna-san?"

"Who knows? I never asked about the details. I wasn't interested. ...Well, these days, orphans aren't that rare, are they?"

After all, until a few years ago, they had even been fighting a civil war among themselves in Ikaruga. There were certainly many people whose parents or origins were unknown.

Of course, the organization that Noel belonged to was partly responsible for that, but if Noel herself was a child caught up in the negative vortex created by the NOL, he couldn't bring himself to criticize the uniform she wore.

"That's true, I suppose."

Still, Noel herself seemed to feel some responsibility for the uniform of the NOL, which was deeply involved in world affairs, and pulled down her short skirt somewhat uncomfortably. Then she suddenly lowered her gaze to her lap.

"I see... so you have siblings, Ragna-san. I'm kind of jealous."

"Jealous?"

"Yes. My friends have really big families, or like, older brothers they've been close to since they were little. I've heard them talk about it a lot, so I've kind of longed for that." Saying that, Noel gave a short laugh.

The laughter she added almost apologetically, despite the relaxed shape of her mouth, was somehow lonely, making Noel look like an ordinary girl who didn't fit in with organizations or weapons at all.

In the tone of the girl talking about her blood relatives, a faint scent of loneliness drifted. Even if she had adoptive parents and friends around her, there must be moments when the emptiness inside her, usually unseen, is suddenly brought to mind. Perhaps being around people who have such things made her want them even more.

For Ragna, who had spent his time not being caught up in things like friends or his past... or rather, not having the time to be caught up in them... Noel's sentimental talk wasn't something he was very familiar with.

But feeling a slight pang in his chest from such sentimental emotions, Ragna reached out and touched Noel's cheek without thinking.

"Don't make that face."

"Eh...?" Noel blinked repeatedly, looking puzzled at the sudden, faint touch. Her eyes, wide with surprise, were the same clear green as his sister's, which further stirred Ragna's sentimentality. He didn't know how to retract his extended fingers, and in the end, he left his hand outstretched, making a bitter face as if chewing on the awkwardness.

"You look a little like my sister. So, um... when you look so lonely, or like you're about to cry... it honestly makes me feel awkward." As he spoke, Ragna was confused by what he was saying. Whether Ragna was awkward or not was none of Noel's business.

But Noel, having completely forgotten the sorrowful look from before, widened her eyes in surprise and tilted her head.

"Me, like Ragna-san's sister?" Her eyes, which had been filled with wonder, slowly softened into a smile. "I don't know, it feels strange, but... I'm happy."

"...What's happy about it? She's the sister of a wanted criminal?"

"Y-Yes, that's true, but..." Annoyed by being teased, Noel pouted unhappily. But she soon used those lips to ask Ragna. "Um, may I ask for your sister's name?" With innocent purity, and a hint of reservation, her green eyes looked at Ragna as if to inquire. Looking back at her, as if dazzled, Ragna let out a wry sigh.

"Yeah. Her name's Saya."

"Saya-san." Noel's downcast face as she murmured the name aloud tickled Ragna's memory. She really did look alike. Very much alike.

Thinking so, his hand, which had only been touching her fingertips, was drawn to Noel's cheek. Unlike the test subjects like Nu who were in the Kagutsuchi underground, she was a girl who existed as a human being with the name Noel Vermillion.

If Saya had grown up peacefully in that church, would she have become like Noel? Blushing when someone heard her humming a song, or smiling happily just because that song was the same as someone else's nostalgic song.

He thought of a future that could never have been, as if the wind was blowing through it. And... truly, the wind suddenly blew right past Ragna.

"'When you look so lonely... it makes me feel awkward,' you said. So, what's next? What are you planning to do with that creepily extended hand?"

"Whoa-whoa-whoa!"

A girl suddenly appeared with the wind, and Ragna, in his agitation, waved his hand wildly and pulled it back.

The girl crouched down between Ragna and Noel, rested her cheek adorably on her folded knees, and directed a not-at-all cute, contemptuous gaze at Ragna.

She was a girl wearing a black, gorgeous dress adorned with frills and ribbons, her lustrous blonde hair tied into two ponytails with large, standing ribbons of the same color. Even before confirming her appearance, Ragna knew who had appeared just from the presence and voice.

"Y-you... Rabbit!" Turning around to face Ragna's strained voice and expression, Rachel Alucard, a vampire who lived in a castle at night, gracefully stood up, her beautiful hair like golden threads swaying. With blood-colored eyes, she looked at Ragna with undisguised contempt.

"Good evening, Ragna. Was I interrupting?" The bewitching and composed smile that didn't suit the girl's appearance was filled with an unusually intimidating aura.

4

"I'll excuse myself for a moment. Rachel-san, please take care of Ragna."

After being briefly introduced to the sudden visitor as someone Noel knew named Rachel, whom she had also met in the Kagutsuchi underground, Noel said that it was good timing, prepared tea for the guest, and then left somewhere.

Left alone in the room with Rachel, Ragna couldn't bring himself to get up and run, and couldn't even do that anyway, so he just awkwardly looked away.

Rachel transformed her familiar, a giant black cat-headed creature named Nago, into a single-seater sofa, sank deeply into it, and was idly pulling on the cheeks of her other familiar, Gii.

The gaze thrown his way from there and the air she exuded were so unmistakably and sharply displeased that Ragna was bewildered. He had no idea why Rachel was so displeased. He just felt incredibly uncomfortable, and without looking at Rachel, Ragna roughly ran his hand through his hair.

"Wh-What is it? You've been giving me weird looks since a while ago. You came here because you had business, right? Then hurry up and tell me what it is." He intended to appear calm, but his voice became strangely rushed and impatient. As if looking down on his tone as well, Rachel intensified the color in her gaze towards Ragna.

"How unkind, calling it a weird look. I'm perfectly normal. ... Does the fact that you think so mean you have something to hide?"

"Oh my, Ragna-chan, you're so precocious~"

"How shameless~, the worst~"

As if riding on Rachel's words, Nago, who was on the sofa, and Gii, whose cheeks had been pulled until then, chimed in with light remarks. Rachel even added a mocking laugh that felt like a kick at the end of her words.

Irritation grated on Ragna's nerves, and forgetting his injury, Ragna shouted back loudly.

"Like hell I do! Ugh, oh..." Instantly, the wound in his stomach throbbed dully. A muffled groan of pain was choked in his throat.

Satisfied with his reaction, Rachel, looking as composed as a young girl in that moment, sniffed and ran her white fingers through her smooth golden hair.

"Hmph, well, never mind. More important than such trivialities, there's something I need to tell you. Although, I don't have much time right now, so I can't explain everything."

"Tell me?" Ragna looked up, still holding his stomach.

Rachel's gaze had changed to that of a wise and calm vampire. From the color of her eyes, Ragna felt that Rachel really didn't have much leeway. Usually, he would have been attacked with sarcastic and persistent remarks for at least that much time.

But as she took a strand of hair and twirled it around her fingertip, Rachel added quietly, "...Even if I had the time, telling you everything wouldn't be interesting, would it?"

Her tone was like someone plotting a small prank, and Ragna's shoulders slumped. Just when he was trying to ask seriously.

"Huh? What's that? Stop being so dramatic and just..."

"Yuuki Terumi has been resurrected."

Ragna's moment of relaxation was only for a fleeting second. As if an invisible thread had been pulled taut, the air became tense with Rachel's single sentence. When Ragna looked up again, her large red eyes were fixed on him, with a piercing intensity.

"You remember what happened in the Kagutsuchi underground the other day, don't you?" Rachel asked in a whisper, but with a strength that was impossible to ignore. Ragna nodded firmly.

"Of course I do. How could I forget something like that so easily?"

He would never forget that night, which was a series of incomprehensible and unexpected events, for the rest of his life.

He was supposed to go destroy the artificially created dolls called Prime Field Devices that were sleeping underground. That was all it was supposed to be, but along the way, he was hindered by his younger brother Jin, and blocked by a man calling himself Hakumen of the Six Heroes. When he finally arrived, the Prime Field that was being refined by the "Cauldron," the gate to the Boundary, had started moving before she was ready, and to make matters worse, Noel, who was nothing to do with it, was there.

And... during the battle with the Prime Field Device Nu, Ragna had almost fallen into the Boundary.

(If it weren't for her, I'd probably be...)

He would have fallen into the Boundary so easily, and wouldn't be here now. The thought sent a shiver down his spine.

That time, Noel's single slender arm, extended from the edge of the Cauldron, had determined Ragna's future.

Looking down at his left hand, which Noel had grabbed, Ragna clenched it as if to confirm the feeling of her hand.

"Yuuki Terumi... he's the guy who attacked our church, right? And that black-suited man who appeared back then..."

That night at the turn of the year, after Ragna was saved. A man visited the underground. A man with an unpleasant aura, wearing a black hat and a black suit.

Judging from Noel's reaction, he seemed to be a member of the NOL, but he quickly changed his attitude... and called himself "Yuuki Terumi."

Thinking of that man, Ragna's expression naturally hardened. Hatred swirled within him. Yuuki Terumi. That man had stolen everything from Ragna's peaceful past.

"What do you mean 'resurrected'? After killing the sister and kidnapping Jin and Saya, was he sealed away or something?"

"Half right and half wrong. Not bad for you."

To Ragna, who asked with unconcealed loathing in his voice, Rachel replied with an unwavering coldness, as if stoking the flames of his hatred.

"When Terumi attacked the church where you lived, he wasn't in perfect condition. He had lost his vessel and existed only as a spiritual entity. But since he couldn't do anything in that state, he acquired a temporary vessel just for that time."

And using that temporary vessel, he killed the sister, burned down the church, and disappeared, taking Ragna's right arm, Jin, and Saya.

"But this time is different. Terumi has obtained a proper vessel and has succeeded in anchoring himself to it."

In front of the Cauldron in the Kagutsuchi underground, Terumi, in Hazama's form, declared triumphantly, "I've regained it." From that moment on, Hazama was both the NOL's intelligence officer "Hazama" and the former Six Heroes and Ragna's enemy, "Terumi."

"So that's what you mean by 'resurrected'."

Rachel nodded deeply at Ragna's twisted, bitter expression. Her gaze gave Ragna a sense of danger. Rachel, who usually smiled calmly and evaded with cryptic words, was now on high alert, trying to discern something that even she couldn't see.

"I don't know what he intends to do yet, but since he's obtained a vessel, he must have some kind of objective. Ragna, be careful of that man. He might be planning something. No, I'm sure he'll make a move soon."

And when that happened, Rachel wouldn't be able to protect Ragna.

As Hazama, an NOL intelligence officer recognized by the world, someone like Rachel, who existed 'outside' the world, couldn't interfere. They existed in different dimensions. Like looking at someone through glass, you can call out to them, but you can't touch them directly through the glass.

"...Just be careful. Especially with Noel, who possesses the true Azure..." Rachel stopped herself mid-sentence, almost reflexively.

Outside the room, the sound of a door opening was heard, followed by the patter of quick footsteps approaching. Soon, the owner of the sound appeared at the entrance of the room. It was Noel.

"Um, excuse me."

Entering the room with a slightly cheerful voice, she looked at Ragna and Rachel's reactions, then sat down where she had been sitting before. And she placed what she had been holding carefully in front of Ragna.

"Eek!"

Rachel was the first to cry out. At the sight of what had appeared, she drew back as far as she could on Nago's sofa, her white hand trembling delicately at her mouth. Her eyes, which had been calm and filled with deep wisdom and concern just moments before, were now wide open, as if she had seen something unearthly.

On the other hand, Ragna was speechless, frozen by even the slightest reaction of raising an eyebrow, staring in complete bewilderment at what had appeared before him. It might be different. It might be a strange feeling, but... it looked as if it had been placed there to be offered to Ragna.

"Um... what is it? That... what exactly is this?" Ragna wondered inwardly at himself for being able to move his mouth at all.

It was indeed a ghastly object that deserved the shrill scream Rachel had let out.

The object itself was an ordinary container. It looked like a ceramic soup bowl. Underneath it was a flat plate, serving as a tray.

The problem was what was inside it. It seemed to be liquid, and white steam was rising from it, indicating it was warm. The color was hard to describe, somewhere between purple, green, gray, and brown. Yet, it didn't quite belong to any of those categories, giving it a distorted hue. The small ingredients floating in the clearly toxic-looking liquid were all unfamiliar. Something long and thin sticking out from the opaque liquid was particularly eye-catching and eerie.

Sitting properly on the floor in front of the dish, Noel fidgeted with her fingers, looking a little embarrassed.

"Um... it's soup. Ragna-san, you've been asleep since last night, and I thought you might be hungry. It's just whatever I could find, but I made it for you."

It seemed this was the reason she had said she was going to step out and hadn't returned for a while. Noel smiled shyly, but her eyes sparkled with a hint of pride as she looked at Ragna, as if waiting for his reaction.

A spoon with a slightly bent handle lay on the plate that had been placed down, and it looked to Ragna as if the spoon was pleading, "Eat me." He swallowed hard.

"Ah... soup... huh. I see, I see, that's right, yeah..."

So bewildered, Ragna's mouth spewed out random words. Noel, simply taking it as surprise at the unexpected appearance of food, chuckled as if looking at something heartwarming.

"There's more if you want, so don't hesitate. It looks a little bad, but... I'm confident in the taste. I'm not bragging, but my friends in school used to tell me they'd never eaten anything so delicious."

"H-Heh... really..."

While harboring considerable doubts about Noel's "a little," Ragna once again looked down at the chef's special "soup." It certainly looked terrible. So terrible that he couldn't think of any other words to describe it. But he had heard the saying that things like that often tasted good.

Besides, her friends in school apparently said it was delicious. In that case, he couldn't deny the possibility of a miraculous taste that completely defied its appearance.

Most importantly, he should be used to food that was a little terrible. If refined students who enrolled into the NOL's military academy could handle it, there was no way it had a taste he couldn't endure.

With a feeling of resolve, Ragna plunged the spoon into the dish, scooping up a spoonful of the strangely viscous "soup." Surprisingly, it didn't smell bad.

(Oh, maybe...)

Perhaps a miracle that defied its appearance was waiting for him.

With a sliver of hope sprouting in his chest, he resolutely brought the spoon to his mouth. Noel's special "soup" left the spoon and touched Ragna's tongue.

That was the moment.

"Guh..." Immediately after hearing his own small groan, Ragna's consciousness exploded.

Chapter 5: Dead once — Phenomenon Intervention

1

January 3, 2200 - 13:05

The Thirteenth Hierarchical City of Kagutsuchi was an especially massive city among the Hierarchical Cities scattered throughout the world. As such, the internal structure supporting the multi-layered city was also vast, and the Kaka clan's village, cleverly built in its gaps, was also sufficiently large to be called a village.

With the ceiling and walls covered by the ground of the upper layers and building materials used to construct the city, the village was like being inside a cave. For this reason, torches had been burning brightly all day long in the past, but the situation was slightly different now.

Due to the underground explosion incident the other day, a part of the roof had collapsed, leaving a gaping hole in the sky. Fortunately, sunlight streamed in from there, giving the Kaka clan's village a modest passage of day and a small sunbathing spot.

On a calm, sunny afternoon, the area would be filled with sleep-loving Kaka clan members who had gathered in search of the warm, soft sunlight.

While glancing at the Kaka people, who had secured their own spots in the not-so-spacious area or were piled on top of each other, sleeping soundly and comfortably, Ragna and Noel were walking through the village together.

"Are you alright? Does your wound hurt?" As they walked, Noel looked up at Ragna, peering at him with a furrowed brow. It was obvious she was worried.

And for good reason. On the first day Ragna woke up in the Kaka clan's village, he couldn't even sit up properly. The fact that he could not only get up but also stand and walk around two days later was, by any measure, an unusual recovery rate.

"That's why... I told you I'm fine. How many times are you going to ask?" Ragna replied, grumbling in annoyance. It wasn't that she had asked him so many times, but her face, which couldn't help but show concern, made him unsure how to respond, which bothered him. "The wound in my stomach has closed, and the pain is almost gone. I can get up now, so if I don't move my body a little, I'll get stiff and won't be able to move at all."

As he said this, Ragna rotated his neck. A small cracking sound echoed. He had been lying down for two days, and already his joints were stiff all over, making it difficult to move. He would've found it more painful if he'd been told to stay lying down.

Noel, being a low-ranking soldier who sometimes engaged in combat, didn't completely misunderstand Ragna's reasoning that his body would become stiff if he didn't move. But still, her worries only grew because the shock of seeing an unconscious Ragna being protected in the Kaka clan's village was too strong.

Come to think of it, as far as Noel was concerned, Ragna was someone who was always standing in front of her whenever she opened her eyes, protecting her from something. She had spent more time looking at the back of his red jacket than standing next to him like this.

That's probably why. When she saw Ragna, who didn't speak, didn't open his eyes, and whose chest barely rose and fell with his weak breaths, she was so surprised that she thought her heart would stop.

She was very scared. When she thought he might die, she was terrified, even though she didn't know anything about him, and had only known his face for a day.

"But... please don't push yourself, okay? You're still injured, after all." Even though she thought she might upset him if she kept pressing, she couldn't help but say it again, just to be sure.

As Noel had expected, Ragna didn't exactly get upset, but he did make an annoyed face and stuck his fingers in his ears.

"I know, I know. Geez, you're so nagging."

"W-what do you mean nagging? I'm worried about you, Ragna-san!"

"Alright, alright. I get it, so don't make that face like you're about to cry."

"I'm not about to cry!"

With a "hmph," as if turning away, Noel swung the golden hair that flowed down her back and faced forward. Her face looked like a sulking child, and Ragna couldn't help but chuckle softly. Immediately, Noel looked up at Ragna, still looking displeased.

"Why are you laughing?"

"No. It's nothing."

Her upward gaze, as if she were glaring at him, was still childlike and even funnier. When Ragna looked away, unable to maintain eye contact, Noel became stubborn and pressed further.

"It's not nothing, is it? You're laughing!"

"No, I told you, it's nothing. It's not like you did anything... heh, hehe..." He realized his mistake and covered his mouth, but it was too late. The chuckle that had escaped made Noel look shocked.

With a complex expression that could be taken as anger or sadness, Noel's face gradually became melancholic, and she lowered her eyebrows in a pitiful way, looking down. She brought her index fingers together in front of her chest, clearly sulking.

"Well, I'm clumsy, and Ragna-san is always helping me... I'm not good at studying, I'm bad at paperwork, my direct superior hates me, I don't have many friends, I'm bad at talking to people, and I don't have big boobs either..."

"Hey, I wasn't talking about boobs!" Ragna waved his hands in front of his face, looking offended.

"The only thing I'm a little good at is maybe cooking..."

"That's a lie."

He had to deny that much. Ragna immediately shook his head. Come to think of it, that soup from yesterday was apparently served to the Kaka clan members who had succumbed to their curiosity. Everyone who ate it fell into a deep sleep as if they had fainted and didn't wake up all night.

"But still, you didn't have to laugh!"

It seemed Ragna's words hadn't registered. Noel glared at him, desperately trying to put on a strong face, but her expression lacked her usual vigor, making him feel more like he should humor her than be intimidated.

Suppressing another smile that threatened to surface, Ragna lightly tapped Noel's head. He couldn't help but think, was this really a soldier of the NOL?

"Sorry. I'm not making fun of you. ...Well, I do think you're an idiot, though." He couldn't help but say it, and his true feelings leaked out.

Instantly, Noel, flustered by the hand touching her head, blushed to her ears, but she quickly protested against the part of his true feelings.

"W-which one is it?"

"Well, um... let's see... oh, that's right." Unable to come up with a convenient excuse on the spur of the moment, Ragna let his gaze wander before changing the subject. "Are you sure about this? Staying in a place like this forever?"

It wasn't just an excuse to escape Noel's pursuit, but something he was actually concerned about. Unlike Litchi, who had returned to the clinic in Orient Town, Noel had been taking care of Ragna yesterday and today.

She seemed to have returned to Orient Town at night, but it was questionable for a soldier, even a temporary one, to keep hanging around in the lower levels, especially in an unauthorized place like the Kaka clan's village.

But contrary to Ragna's concern, Noel nodded very readily.

"Ah, yes. I was actually supposed to meet a friend at Litchi-san's clinic, but it seems that friend can't come here right away."

The general situation with Makoto had been written in a letter from her to Litchi, with a message for Noel included. Since Makoto hadn't written where she was, Noel couldn't send a reply, but at least it seemed that no emergency situation like being detained by the NOL had occurred. So Noel thought she would wait until Makoto's business was properly finished.

"Until then, I thought I'd help Ragna-san with his treatment, or help Litchi-san. Something like that."

"I see, so you've already talked about it over there." In that case, Ragna wouldn't have anything to say.

Ragna and Noel's aimless walk had brought them to the center of the village.

In what looked like a small plaza, some young Kakka children were crouching down, talking about something. Hearing Ragna and Noel's footsteps, they looked up with bright eyes and turned around.

"Ah, Good Guy! Not Good Guy!"

From the right were Cali-kaka, Fluffy-kaka, Spotty-kaka, and Feisty-kaka, a group of four close Kaka kittens. As expected of the Kaka clan, they wore clothes that completely covered their bodies, with large triangular ears on their large hoods and cat-like tails extending from their backs. In their featureless black faces, round eyes and triangular mouths were stuck on, and when they ran up to Ragna and Noel, they looked up at them with simple and endearing smiles.

"Not-Good Guy, let's play~"

"P-please don't call me not-Good Guy...!" Noel refused with a tearful voice, unable to scold Feisty-kaka, who had a white tip on his tail, when he said it innocently.

Perhaps her desperation got through. Tilting his small head, Fluffy-kaka, who had an orange ribbon on his chest, looked at Noel with round eyes.

"Then, big sister?"

"Y-yes, I'm your big sister."

She didn't often get called big sister. Noel nodded several times, feeling not entirely displeased. It didn't feel bad. Sensing Noel's cheerful mood, the little Kaka started waving their hands and circling around Noel one after another.

"Big sister, play with us, play with us!"

"Play with us~"

"Oh dear, I suppose I have no choice. Just for a little while, okay?" While saying she had no choice, Noel was already completely in the mood, meeting the little Kaka's gaze and answering with a smile that looked like it would burst. Instantly, the little Kaka jumped up and down, excited.

"Yay, yay! What should we play?"

"Let's play tag!"

"Let's play hide-and-seek!"

"Let's do that! Woo, run away~!"

Finishing their discussion in the blink of an eye, the little Kaka children all ran away from Noel at once.

"Eh, wait, wait! Which one are we doing, anyway?!" A beat later, Noel also started running in a hurry.

"Oh, oh, she's already getting pulled around."

Ragna sat down on a nearby barrel, deciding to watch the spectacle.

It seemed they had decided to play tag and hide-and-seek simultaneously, and the little Kaka were frantically running away from Noel, who had been automatically assigned the role of the seeker, and hiding behind things. The rule seemed to be that even if they were discovered hiding, they wouldn't stop running and hiding until they were caught. There were four little Kaka, and of course, only one Noel chasing them. It was quite an unfavorable match.

"Wa-wa-wait, wait!"

The calico Cali-kaka nimbly slipped through the arms Noel reached out to catch her and jumped high. Chasing after her and desperately reaching out, Noel somehow managed to trap the first one in her arms.

"I-I caught..."

"Kyaaa!!!"

Interrupting Noel's panting voice, a piercing scream suddenly echoed around them.

It took a beat for them to freeze, wondering what was happening. Ragna kicked away the barrel he was sitting on and stood up, and Noel, who had been holding Cali-kaka, put her down and turned around, almost simultaneously.

"Guh... guh... guh-puh-puh... puh-puh...!"

One of the children who had been playing with Noel, Spotty-kaka, who had a white body with gray markings and a tail curled inward, was being held up by a thin, bony hand, as a black mass crawled up from the ground.

"That's...!" Ragna spoke aloud, his eyes narrowed and his gaze fixed on the black mass. Attached to the formless, writhing body that looked like it was made of gathered sludge was a white mask that resembled a human face.

Taokaka had called it "Squiggly," and Litchi had called it "Arakune," a monster of seithr that lived in the sewers. And... if Litchi's story was true, it was a pitiful and foolish former researcher who had lost his human self and form while engrossed in research on the Boundary.

"Tch..." Ragna reached out his hand and clicked his tongue. He didn't have the sword he always carried. He had left it in the room he was borrowing. "Damn it, no choice!"

If there were no weapons, he'd have to do it with his bare hands. Ragna raised his gloved fist and started running. But, as if to stop him, Noel's voice rang out energetically.

"Bolverk!" Her voice quickly passed by Ragna's side. Two pistols appeared out of nowhere in Noel's hand as she ran lightly. They were a matching pair of guns with long, white barrels.

Noel quickly pointed the gun at Arakune and fired. What was fired from the gun was not a bullet, but an Ars Magus accompanied by a small magic circle.

Ragna understood at a glance. That was a Nox Nyctores. The Nox Nyctores, Arcus Diabolus: Bolverk.

The Ars Magus Noel fired hit the bone-like thin arm that was capturing Spotty-kaka, freeing the small body that was cowering in fear. Catching the curled-up body just before it hit the ground, Noel threw Spotty-kaka towards Ragna.

"Ragna-san, please!"

"Wha- what, I got it!"

Perhaps he hadn't expected to be thrown, Spotty-kaka came flying towards him with a scream, and Ragna had no choice but to catch him firmly with both hands.

As soon as he put him down on the ground, the three others he had been playing with ran up, hiding behind Ragna's legs and hugging each other as if huddling together.

"Hey, Noel, don't do anything reckless on your own!"

Looking up, Ragna saw that Noel had already taken a fighting stance, standing in front of Arakune as if to block its path. To Ragna, who raised his voice with deep concern, Noel retorted firmly, as if to stop him.

"I'm fine! Ragna-san, please don't push yourself. I'll handle this...!" Noel pointed the guns she held in both hands at Arakune, glaring at the creature that was shuddering and twitching as if it was threatening them.

He could see several monstrous shapes wriggling in the black, stagnant ground at its feet. It smelled terrible. The three holes on the mask that seemed to indicate its eyes and mouth were so empty that they were eerie.

But—

"The Kaka children... and Ragna-san, I'll protect them!" Just as Ragna had protected her underground when she couldn't move. Not wanting to end up just trembling and doing nothing, Noel gave herself a mental command and leaped forward, kicking off the ground.

Noel twisted her body in midair and shot Ars Magus into Arakune's torso, then kicked the side of its mask with the heel of her boot.

The sensation, clearly different from liquid, felt soft yet hard, hard yet soft. While feeling a fleeting unease about whether the damage had gone through, she landed and simultaneously fired a series of Ars Magus at the feet of the wriggling black monster.

"Giiiiiiii!"

A screech like metal scraping against metal rang out, and Arakune lowered its body and recoiled. But it didn't leave.

"...It smells... it smells... you smell... you, the Azure..."

Ignoring where its joints should be, Arakune planted its bone-like hands, which protruded from its black body, on the ground, and crawled along the ground while staring at Noel with its masked face.

Its empty gaze was fixed on Noel and wouldn't let go. Even though it had no expression whatsoever, its writhing body and the way it crawled along the ground, its bone-like hands scraping the ground with a dry sound, made it seem like a human being consumed by greed.

What made this black monster, Arachne, so eerie and sent chills down Noel's spine was that, despite its clearly monstrous appearance, its words and gestures occasionally appeared unexpectedly human.

Just when she thought it was reaching out its bone-like hand as if to grasp a treasure, Arakune suddenly shuddered violently and spewed out a mass of poisonous colored mist towards Noel.

"Azure... Azure... Azureeeeee!"

"Ugh, kuh... what is this... seithr?"

It seemed like seithr, but it wasn't just that. Something sticky clung to her, making Noel openly uncomfortable. She felt like her body had suddenly become heavy. It smelled terrible.

"Noel!" Ragna's warning flew over, and Noel looked up sharply.

Arakune, having leapt up silently, transformed into the shape of jaws about to devour its prey, and was baring its fangs, trying to eat Noel from above.

Noel used her twin pistols as a shield to absorb the impact, which felt like being slammed by a wave of mud, and managed to withstand it. But as the impact subsided, like a receding wave, fist-sized monstrous insects jumped at her one after another from her feet, from the front, and from behind, biting into Noel.

"Eek, ah, kyaa!?"

A caterpillar-like creature with a large mouth clung to Noel's shoulder. Next, a light blue insect that had fallen from above clung to her hair, drooping down.

Fear surged through her, and Noel moved around frantically. She knocked off the biting insects with the gun barrels, and shot down each one that jumped at her with Ars Magus bullets.

Taking advantage of that opening, she kicked away the bone-like organ that Arakune thrust out, then fired Ars Magus while slamming the gun barrel into it from point-blank range. While shaking off the insects, she swept at Arakune's feet, and when it stumbled, she mercilessly showered it with a rain of Ars Magus from Bolverk.

Kicking off the ground to gain distance before Arakune could get up, Noel finally let out a rough breath, her shoulders rising and falling rapidly.

"Ugh..." A feeling of physical revulsion welled up inside her. But whether it was from the revulsion or not, something was rising up, causing both Noel and Arakune to brace themselves.

"A... A, u... gaga-gaga-gaga, it's becoming, it's becoming, aaaaaaah!"

Suddenly, it shrunk on the spot as if a person was crouching down, and lowered its white masked face.

"With Azure Eyes, you capture me, this ugly thing, don't seal me in this body, I'm different, I'm different! This world is all knowledge, it's wrong, you push people into definitions and give them masks. I'm different!"

"Wh-what...?"

The words coming from Arakune sounded like human words, but parts of them were cut off and muddied like noise, making it impossible to understand what it was saying. She understood only that it seemed to be in great pain and terrified. What was it afraid of?

When Noel took a step closer, Arakune recoiled as if twisting its body, retreating far back. Its bony hands struggled to cover its white mask.

"Azure... look, aaaaaaah!" Letting out a voice that sounded like a death cry, Arakune was sucked into a small crack at its feet in an instant, as if she was watching the process of seithr erupting in reverse.

Suddenly, the surroundings became quiet. Noel, whose enemy had suddenly disappeared before her eyes, was momentarily unable to process what had happened and stood there blankly.

"S-so cool, big sister!" Breaking the silence, Spotty-kaka stood his white tail straight up, raised both hands high, and ran up to Noel, jumping up and down. Then Cali-kaka, Feisty-kaka, and Fluffy-kaka followed.

Finally coming to her senses as the little Kaka gathered around her, Noel twirled the magic guns, Bolverk, which she was still holding in both hands, and made them disappear like magic, then crouched down and patted the heads of the four in turn.

"Are you alright? Are you hurt?"

"Yeah, we're fine~!" The four of them returned a bright smile in unison and hugged Noel's arm.

Patting each of them again, Noel stood up and turned to face Ragna, who had approached belatedly.

"Ragna-san, were you alright too?"

"Yeah, you can see that, can't you? Even so, you're surprisingly strong. There are other things I'm curious about, but... well, I've reconsidered you."

What Ragna was curious about was the gun Noel had been using, the Arcus Diabolus: Bolverk.

Nox Nyctores can't be used by just anyone. First and foremost, a higher-than-normal aptitude for Ars Magus is required.

Moreover, the gun Noel was using fired Ars Magus instead of bullets. Even with a considerable "higher-than-normal" aptitude, he didn't think she could fire that many shots in a row if she was wielding Bolverk.

Ragna had wondered what abilities Noel possessed that allowed her to become a soldier, considering she was bad at studying, organizing documents, and talking to people, and only had a little confidence in her cooking skills. But now he understood.

However, he still wanted to question her about the situation of using such a dangerous weapon as a Nox Nyctores.

"Oh, thank you." Noel tilted her chin back in embarrassment at Ragna's "I've reconsidered you." Then, she finally noticed. "Ah, w-wa..." Noel hurriedly pressed her hand to her chest.

When had it happened? The neckline of her clothes was ripped wide open, revealing an indecent amount of the white skin underneath. Even holding it with her hand had its limits. It wouldn't be as much of a problem in a Kaka village, but she definitely couldn't walk around Orient Town like this.

"Excuse me, I'm going to just..." She needed to borrow sewing supplies and at least stitch it up temporarily. Noel held the torn fabric and tried to leave the spot, making herself small. But Ragna roughly grabbed her arm and stopped her.

"Eh... Ragna-san..." He grabbed Noel's shoulders, forcefully pulling away the hand she was using to cover her chest. He grabbed the large tear in her clothes and, with a force that seemed like he would rip it apart, exposed even more of Noel's chest. "Huh!? E-eh! W-wait, stop, don't look...!"

Noel squirmed, trying to escape. Not only was her skin visible through the large opening, but so was her chest, which she wasn't particularly confident about. But Ragna didn't care and stared

intently at Noel's exposed chest. His strangely serious gaze only intensified Noel's embarrassment.

"R-Ragna-san!" Finally unable to bear it any longer, Noel said reproachfully. The only response she got was a cold, emotionless word.

"...'Twelve'." Ragna certainly muttered that.

Noel's movements stopped abruptly.

Twelve. That was the number on the mark engraved on Noel's chest.

For someone who was just curious about the strange mark, Ragna's voice was too low. Noel cautiously raised her gaze and looked up at Ragna, who was staring at her chest, as if trying to gauge his reaction.

Ragna didn't look at Noel's eyes. He just stared intently at the number "twelve" engraved on her chest. Then, suddenly, he pushed Noel away forcefully.

"Hyah!" It was so sudden that Noel stumbled and fell on her rear. But that freed her. She quickly put her hand over the torn clothes, and Noel looked at Ragna with confused and reproachful eyes. "W-what are you doing all of a sudden!?"

"...Are you a Prime Field?"

"Huh?"

Ragna asked in a cold, unfamiliar tone. Not understanding the meaning, Noel frowned and asked him again.

But Ragna didn't wait for Noel's reply. For a few seconds, he stared at Noel with wide eyes. At Noel's face.

It was very similar. Exactly like his younger sister, Saya.

"You... so that's what it was..."

Ragna felt a fire ignite in the pit of his stomach. The fire was burning with anger. He felt like he had been deceived, betrayed. There was also a feeling of denial, that this couldn't be happening. But what he had seen couldn't be denied.

"Ragna-san?" Noel stood up, her face pale with worry, wondering what had happened.

At that anxious expression, Ragna put even more force into his words than when he had pushed her earlier.

"...Get lost. Don't ever appear before me again." He said it as coldly as possible.

Eh, Noel let out a confused sound, a half-hearted smile forming on her lips as if it were a joke. But every single gesture and facial expression was now unpleasant to Ragna.

He frowned sharply, looked at Noel as if she were something disgusting, and turned on his heel. He left the Kaka village quickly, as if he had truly decided never to get involved again.

Noel was speechless at Ragna as he strode away. She couldn't understand what had happened at all. There was only one thing she felt for certain. Right now, Ragna hated her very much.

Thinking that, a piercing pain weighed on Noel's chest... and without realizing it, Noel began shedding tears, her tears dripping.

3

January 3, 2200 - 13:05

The wind, carrying dust, seithr, and the scent of lunch, crawled through Ronin-Gai.

Just like yesterday, the sky was idly clear, and in the distant heights, white clouds stretched out like they had been brushed on with a brush.

The weather wouldn't break today. Swallowing the dry air mixed with seithr, typical of the lower levels, Jin stopped walking, then started again.

At this time, Ronin-Gai was less crowded than he expected. Many residents were without relatives, and since a large number of them gathered to eat lunch at once, they were probably still at their tables. He had come outside at just the right time. He didn't like walking around this town when it was crowded.

Even so, while heading towards the seemingly deserted outskirts, Jin frowned at the distant view visible between the buildings.

With every breath he took, his impatience grew, wondering what he was doing in a place like this. He hadn't jumped off the Ars Magus ship or come all the way to Kagutsuchi for this.

But with every breath he took, he told himself that now wasn't the time to rush.

His physical condition was still not perfect. It was only yesterday after all. The injuries that reached his bones hadn't healed yet, and his fever hadn't gone down.

The fever had been suppressed by a medicine with an unknown name, passed down from ancient times in Ikaruga, and he felt much better now. But he had to constantly remind himself that it was thanks to the medicine, not his own strength.

(What will I become if I leave here now? What can I do?)

No, what should I do in the first place?

He still hadn't found an answer. He still couldn't see the depths of his own heart.

In this state... if he were to meet his older brother, Ragna, as originally intended, he could easily imagine what he'd think and do at that moment.

Jin looked at his own hands.

(Was it Jubei...? If I had that "Power of Order" he was talking about, would I not be dragged around by Yukianesa...?)

What meaning is there in doing something after losing oneself? What meaning is there in killing someone because a weapon told you to?

(No... have I ever done anything for a reason in the first place?)

Not something I was asked or ordered to do. Something I wanted myself, set a goal for, and acted upon...

Nothing...

"—Major Jin Kisaragi."

Suddenly, a voice called his name.

A stiff voice calling a stiff name. Jin instantly recognized whose voice it was. And without doubling back, he slowly opened his eyes.

It might have been the voice he least wanted to hear right now. And at the same time, it might have been the voice he most wanted to hear.

Dragging his feet on the ground, Jin turned around. The sleeve of his blue jacket fluttered greatly in the dust-filled wind.

Standing there was a figure completely covered in a white robe. A hood concealed even the color of their hair, and a white mask covering their entire face hid even their features.

It was the attire used by the Novus Orbis Librarium's Zero Squadron, commonly known as "Wings of Judgment" when carrying out their primary mission, assassination.

But even if they tried to hide with the robe and hood, and cover up with the mask, it didn't matter.

"Is that you... Tsubaki?" Jin called out the name cautiously.

The masked assassin remained still for a moment, but then quietly reached out from under the robe and placed a hand on the mask concealing their face. Gently removing it, a girl's face was revealed.

Blue eyes, stubbornly mixed with loyalty to her mission, stared straight at Jin. Pulling the hood back with the hand that had removed the mask, her vivid red hair fluttered in the Ronin-Gai wind.

Tsubaki Yayoi. A girl who had grown up with him in the narrow world of the Duodecim. He hadn't heard her call him "Brother" in a while.

"It's been a while, Brother Jin." Neither glaring nor smiling, Tsubaki, who had revealed her face to Jin, stated calmly. Jin, on the other hand, couldn't help but show agitation on his usually unwavering calm face.

"Why are you here...? And that uniform..." Jin's expression clouded at the sight of the white uniform.

Jin knew that Tsubaki had achieved excellent grades as a top student at the NOL's military academy, and of course, that she had graduated with honors. However, he hadn't heard about her subsequent career path from Tsubaki herself.

The Tsubaki he knew would have contacted him as soon as her assignment was decided. That's why he had found it strange that he hadn't heard from her at all... but if her assignment was to the Zero Squadron, it made sense.

Being assigned to the "Wings of Judgment" assassin squad was not something easily disclosed. After all, the people they killed were mainly those within the NOL.

"Why are you here...? I'd like to ask you the same thing, Brother Jin. Why are you here, in Kagutsuchi?"

Tsubaki looked at Jin with utter coldness, asking with lips as vividly pink as flower petals. Her lips continued the mission expressionlessly.

"Major Jin Kisaragi. You disappeared from Librarium headquarters against the orders of the main branch, and pursued the 'Grim Reaper' Ragna the Bloodedge alone. You ignored repeated orders to return, and although you were once apprehended, you escaped again... Your series of actions constitute the crime of desertion, and the Novus Orbis Librarium has determined it to be a serious act of rebellion."

Desertion is a serious crime in the NOL. Once you have sworn allegiance to the NOL, deserting from it is considered equivalent to betraying the world.

As if unable to bear the mechanical tone any longer, Tsubaki gradually let her emotions show as she looked at Jin and asked again.

"Please tell me. Why are you in Kagutsuchi? Why did you desert? There's a reason... isn't there?" The end of her sentence was weak, more like pleading with Jin than questioning him.

Tsubaki wasn't asking for the reason for his desertion. She was seeking it. A reason that would show that there was a valid reason for deserting, something worthy of sympathy and understanding, something that would prove that he wasn't just a deserter or a criminal she had to pursue.

But Jin shook his head weakly. There was no such thing. Because both his escape from the NOL and his escape from the Ars Magus ship were actions driven by impulse.

"Unfortunately, I can't give you the words you want to hear."

"Does that mean... you're admitting your guilt? That your desertion and rebellion were wrong?"

"I can't complain if you take it that way."

He had no intention of arguing in the first place. He fully understood that he had committed a serious crime. Besides, for Jin, the NOL was never a place worthy of loyalty in the first place. He had only entered because the Kisaragi family, who had taken him in, had asked him to, and he had fought as they asked. It was just that kind of place.

Even if he was pointed at as a rebel and invited to join, his heart wouldn't ache even slightly. If this meant he would be expelled from the NOL, it would even be convenient in a way.

But Tsubaki was different from Jin.

Tsubaki was speechless and breathless for several seconds at Jin's reply. She hesitated two or three times about what to say. Then, as if having made up her mind, she tightened her lips and placed her hand on the voluminous robe that concealed even her figure.

"...I see. That's very regrettable. Then," she said heavily, as if sinking, and threw off the robe as if tearing it away. Beneath it was a white garment of an old design. The voluminous sleeves and hem of her pants were tightened by gloves and boots that covered her fingertips. A bizarre hat adorned with eyeballs sat atop her vibrant red hair.

Spreading her arms, Tsubaki wordlessly requested. Then, a shield and sword, also part of her attire, appeared in her hands. A shield shaped like a thick book, and a sword with the feather of a quill pen as its blade.

Tsubaki pointed the red, translucent blade of the pen-shaped sword directly at Jin.

"...We are the apostles of the white day sent on the last day, and the knights of the blue flame. White feathers are proof of purity, black feathers are the origin of original sin. We are the agents of God who judge sin and challenge form!"

It was a phrase indicating loyalty to the NOL, and a declaration of execution by the Zero Squadron, the "Wings of Judgment."

But more than being threatened with a blade, more than the declaration of the death penalty, Jin's attention was drawn to the special attire Tsubaki was wearing.

The "Sealed Armament: Izayoi." A special armament passed down through generations in Tsubaki's family, the Yayoi family, it draws out the wearer's power and also grants them immense strength. But in return, the user loses their eyesight.

"Don't be ridiculous!"

Was she really going to obey the NOL's orders to the point of bringing out something like that? Tsubaki's unacceptable decision made Jin simultaneously feel responsible for driving her to this and the desire not to make her fight, which prevented him from kneeling.

"Haaah!" Letting out a spirited shout filled with wind, Tsubaki rushed in with the red sword in hand. A red slash carried up from below.

"Tch, Tsubaki!" He couldn't just stand there and be killed by the blade. Jin reached out his hand forward. Responding to his inner call, a sword in a blue scabbard was grasped in his hand. Mucro Algesco: Yukianesa.

Jin blocked Tsubaki's slash with the scabbard, then parried the blow from the shield that followed, lightly jumping backward to create distance for a drawing strike. He held Yukianesa at his waist, his hand on the hilt.

Instantly.

Kill.

A voice resonated from the hilt he touched, traveling up his arm, through his brain, no, through his entire body.

Enemy. Kill.

Again. His hand moved on its own, quickly drawing Yukianesa.

"Ugh!" A slash coated in ice cut through Tsubaki, who had stepped forward to pursue him. Fortunately, the slash itself was blocked by the strange, book-shaped shield, but the icy wind that swept through with the force of the slash struck Tsubaki sideways. A small, thin, shallow red line had appeared around Tsubaki's eye, probably where a stray piece had cut her.

The voice... Yukianesa's voice resonated, tempting him.

Now, kill her!

"Don't be ridiculous! I can't kill her. There's no way I can kill her."

The rising urge churned in his chest, making Jin's breath tremble.

His senses were cooling down. Whenever he wielded Yukianesa, his body was always cold. Was he going to fight again, as this icy blade demanded?

(I won't... let that happen.)

He couldn't kill Tsubaki, no matter what.

Jin suppressed the growing urge deep within him and sheathed the flawless silver blade in its blue scabbard. Then he made Yukianesa disappear from his hand.

"Major Kisaragi?"

It was Tsubaki who was taken aback. Forgetting to even take a stance, she looked at Jin with a puzzled expression. Then, she bit her lip in frustration, her eyes, the same color as the clear blue sky, blazing with intense hostility.

"You think I can't hurt you unless I'm serious, Major?"

"...That's not it."

She probably thought she was being insulted. Jin shook his head in denial at Tsubaki, who glared at him while looking deeply hurt.

He couldn't speak any more. He was struggling to control himself. But it was better to be killed by Tsubaki's hands than to kill her with his own.

"Brother Jin..." Lowering her head, his foster sister's muttered voice sounded like a sob. But there were no tears in Tsubaki's eyes when she looked up.

Tsubaki was a member of the "Wings of Judgment." A completely impartial executor of justice. Personal feelings were unnecessary for that mission. Tears were the most unnecessary of all.

"...Prepare yourself, Major Kisaragi!"

As if shaking off hesitation and conflict, Tsubaki took a stance with her shield and charged straight at him. She drew back the red sword as far as she could and thrust it forward, deeply, deeply.

That was when it happened.

Something crossed between Jin and Tsubaki.

It was round, small. Something both Jin and Tsubaki recognized... a ball. To be precise, a ball very similar to the one in their memories. The same one shouldn't be here.

Gold, peach, red, and green. The brightly colored ball, decorated with a large flower pattern, bounced once right in front of Jin and passed by.

Chasing after that ball, a small shadow darted out.

(Yesterday's—)

Jin's breath caught. It was the younger sister of the pair who had brought pickles to Bang yesterday.

His ears caught someone's scream. Probably the older sister's. She was calling out a name.

In Jin's line of sight, he saw Tsubaki's expression change.

The tip of the sword she held was aimed straight, straight at the girl, piercing her. It was as if Tsubaki was stabbing and killing her younger self... and he didn't want to make her hold such a painful sword.

Jin reached out to the scene of the world unfolding in slow motion, and strongly pulled the running child's hand.

While holding the girl close to his chest, he twisted his body so that his back would become a shield. He half-threw the child backward to get her away.

He thought it was the moment he released the child's arm, which was like a doll's.

"Ah..."

An impact, as if he had been struck by something, hit his back, and when he looked down at the premonition, a red tip was protruding from his chest. The tip of the Izayoi sword that Tsubaki had been holding.

"Jin... Brother..." Tsubaki's voice came from behind him. Her voice was weak and hoarse, and seemed to be trembling pitifully.

He thought he had to answer. But in this position, he couldn't even see Tsubaki's face. Red blood dripped from the tip of the protruding blade.

"No way... I... this, this..." Tsubaki's trembling voice took a step back.

He understood. Tsubaki hadn't thrust the sword in to kill him. It was a threatening blow to show that she was serious. At most, she intended to slash his arm or shoulder, showing that she wouldn't hesitate to attack just because she called him brother. Perhaps she was even intending to urge him to surrender once more.

Because as everyone who knew her would think, Tsubaki was... a very kind person.

(Ah...)

Tsubaki, he had to call out to her.

But he couldn't speak, and Jin's consciousness, as if losing strength from his knees and collapsing, was swallowed into a deep darkness—

—Case 52149. Inappropriate event detected. Starting phenomenon intervention.

The system is operating normally. Event reconstruction... 3... 2... 1...

...Occurrence of probabilistic event confirmed. Starting observation.

...Nothing...

"Kisaragi-senpai!"

Suddenly, a voice called his name.

It was a well-modulated voice, with a bouncy brightness and strength.

Jin knew who it was without even turning around.

Dragging his feet on the ground, Jin turned around. The sleeve of his blue jacket fluttered greatly in the dust-filled wind.

Standing there was Makoto Nanaya, not in her black poncho uniform, but in light combat gear that shamelessly exposed her toned abs and muscular stomach.

4

Her thick, large tail, extending straight back from the top of her short skirt, twitched as Makoto ran up to Jin, patting her ample chest in relief.

"Geez, if you're going outside, at least tell me! I wasn't in the room, so I was worried you'd gone somewhere!"

Her reproachful tone was still cheerful, perfectly reflecting her optimistic personality that he had witnessed countless times during their student days.

Faced with the beastkin junior who was relieved to see him safe and sound, more than being worried about him or his reckless actions, Jin was seized by a strange feeling.

"Lieutenant... Makoto... Nanaya...?"

"Huh? Is there something on my face?"

"No, it's not that..."

Something was wrong.

Frowning at the strange feeling, Jin stared intently at Makoto's figure as if to confirm it.

Was it really her who had just called out to him?

It felt like it was someone else's voice... someone he least wanted to hear right now, but at the same time, someone he most wanted to hear.

"You shouldn't walk around outside so casually. Even though it's the lower-level Ronin-Gai, you never know when you might run into someone from the NOL."

There was no sign of such a presence, but Makoto said it in a rather light tone, glancing around just in case.

Tucking her long tail behind her and turning to Jin, Makoto looked into his green eyes, her own large eyes serious, and raised her index finger as if to instruct him, looking into the eyes of her senior and superior.

"Listen. Right now, Kisaragi-senpai is... a full-fledged rebel as far as the NOL is concerned."

"A rebel, huh." Jin muttered blandly. Until a few days ago, he had been the one chasing and cracking down on them, but now it seemed like a distant story that had nothing to do with him.

Into such a somewhat empty train of thought, a phrase he had heard somewhere floated up like a stepping stone rising from muddy water.

Disappeared from Librarium headquarters against the main branch's orders and pursued the "Grim Reaper" Ragna... Ignored repeated orders to return... Although once apprehended, escaped again.

"Crime of desertion..." Before he knew it, he had uttered those words. Makoto, who had keenly picked up on his faint mutter, nodded emphatically, looking slightly surprised.

"That's right, crime of desertion. It's a serious crime within the NOL." Within the Novus Orbis Librarium, it was a crime serious enough to be condemned as a rebel for that one offense alone. "You're not in the best shape right now, so you should be extra careful. Come on, let's go back inside."

Makoto's reasoning was certainly valid.

Jin sighed once and decided to obediently follow his junior's instructions. Right now, there was nothing less reliable than his own judgment.

As if to emphasize being extra careful, Makoto went around to the back of Bang's house just in case and entered through the back door. It was at that moment Bang, walking heavily from the direction of the front entrance, arrived and, upon seeing Makoto and Jin, breathed a sigh of relief with an uncharacteristically serious face.

"Oh, you've returned. You gave me a scare."

"A scare? Why, what happened?"

The house was quiet, and it didn't seem like anything unusual had happened. But after asking, Makoto made a small sniff and her expression tightened.

"...Tsubaki's here, isn't she?"

Makoto was a beastkin. Her senses were closer to an animal's than a human's. Her keen sense of smell told Makoto about a person standing outside the front entrance.

Jin frowned, looking troubled.

"Why is Tsubaki here?"

"Well... it's a bit of a complicated story." With that preface, Makoto quickly and briefly explained the situation to Jin.

Jin and Noel were considered rebels, and an assassination order had been issued for both of them. The person ordered to carry out the assassination mission was Tsubaki, who belonged to the Zero Squadron.

"The Zero Squadron... 'Wings of Judgment.' Tsubaki..."

Tsubaki's assignment was news to Jin. Confused by the unexpected choice, he furrowed his brow tightly. He never imagined that Tsubaki would take on the role of assassinating people from the NOL, hiding her face with a mask.

"So, what do we do?" Bang asked Makoto and Jin, glancing at the front entrance.

Makoto replied quickly, rattling off words.

"I was planning to talk to Tsubaki eventually, but it's a bit awkward here right now. Can you somehow send her away so she doesn't meet Kisaragi-senpai? Make it seem like you don't know me or Kisaragi-senpai."

"Understood. Leave it to me." Bang slapped his thick chest with his hand and hurried towards the entrance where Tsubaki was waiting. Following him, but hiding around the corner of the hallway so they couldn't be seen from outside, Makoto and Jin listened to Tsubaki's voice outside.

"My name is Tsubaki Yayoi, Middle Station, of the Novus Orbis Librarium. I have come because I have something to ask."

Jin's expression tightened at the voice he heard. There was no mistake, it was Tsubaki's voice. However, it wasn't the emotional voice he had heard during their student days, which often laughed and got angry, but a stiff, soldierly voice that had been carefully adjusted to be disciplined.

"For certain reasons, I am looking for a person named Jin Kisaragi. You might know him better as the 'Hero of Ikaruga'... He should have passed through this town. Have you seen him?"

Completely ceremonious and businesslike.

Bang replied with a gruff voice, his displeasure evident.

"Even if you say he should have passed through, I haven't seen him."

"Major Kisaragi is a fugitive. If he were to enter Kagutsuchi on foot instead of by Ars Magus ship, passing through this lower layer and Ronin-Gai would be the most efficient route. There's no way he hasn't passed through."

"I don't know. Even if I did know, I wouldn't get involved. That man is the one who destroyed our homeland. I don't want someone like him wandering around this area when it's finally recovering from the wounds of war."

The words Bang returned to Tsubaki contained his unmistakable true feelings, and were heavy and realistic.

Tsubaki, who had come to see Bang as the leader of Ronin-Gai, looked at the leader's troubled reply with suspicious light in her blue eyes, trying to gauge his true intentions. After that, she sighed as if giving up, lowered her head, and took a step back.

"...I understand. Then, if you happen to see him, please contact the NOL." It was a strange word and feeling to ask a resident of the lower levels and a former citizen of Ikaruga to contact the NOL.

Bang, still looking stern, listened to Tsubaki's words and closed the front door before she had completely left. He didn't forget to check for Tsubaki's presence and observe her movements through the closed door.

Makoto and Jin also didn't immediately come out from the shadows of the hallway, carefully following Tsubaki's receding footsteps. It seemed she intended to enter Kagutsuchi on foot.

When the footsteps and presence were completely gone, Makoto quickly pulled herself away from the hallway wall.

"Tsubaki's already arrived... We need to hurry a bit."

"Hurry for what?" Jin, who hadn't yet heard what Makoto was planning to do, asked with a stern look, as if interrogating her. But Makoto returned to the back of Bang's home, quickly grabbing the black poncho and hat that had been left there.

"I'm sorry, Senpai, I have a few things I need to do. But I'll be back here soon, so please wait here until then. You absolutely, positively can't let the NOL and Tsubaki find you!"

No sooner had she said that than Makoto put on the poncho and dashed out the back door of Bang's house.

Jin's attempt to stop her was completely futile. At times like that, he was reminded that she was not just a human, but a beastkin closer to an animal. She tended to prioritize intuition, momentum, and action over deliberation, procedure, and explanation.

"First and foremost, you need to recuperate." Bang, who had finished seeing off Makoto as she hurriedly left, approached Jin and crossed his arms. Judging from his tone and expression, Bang also seemed a little bewildered by Makoto's overly energetic actions.

"...I can't deal with her nagging later." Saying that curtly, Jin returned to the room he had borrowed to rest his unwell body. He opened the Ikaruga-style sliding door and closed it. The room, where the sun shone in at sharp angles, had correspondingly deep shadows and was quiet.

Alone in the small space, Jin furrowed his brow sharply.

It wasn't a misunderstanding. It wasn't an illusion either.

Just now... when Makoto called out to him outside, something happened.

The world seemed to distort for a moment, as if something had been erased by a terrible noise.

"What on earth... was that..."

What was it? Had he forgotten something he shouldn't have?

A deep sense of unease remained in Jin's chest. Desperately trying to trace it, Jin attempted to find the source of the discomfort.

For some reason, Tsubaki's crying face had been stuck in his mind ever since.

5

January 3, 2200 - 14:51

He had no idea where he had walked, no matter how much he tried to recall.

He had just walked aimlessly, run, and walked.

Before he knew it, Ragna was rushing roughly into a familiar wide street.

The upper layer's ground, widely covering the sky, blocked out the sun in the lower-level, bustling metropolis of Orient Town. Instead of sunlight, streetlights and colorful neon signs, lit all day long, illuminated the countless buildings and passageways packed tightly together, sharply delineating the bright main streets from the dark back alleys.

The main streets, swirling with noise, were overflowing with people even today, and occasionally, the menacing voices of quarrels could be heard.

No one who passed by looked at Ragna, let alone made eye contact, as they hurried past him, averting their faces. Perhaps his expression was particularly fierce, as a child he bumped into cried, and a young woman who jumped out of an alley screamed as if offering a sacrifice and ran away.

But Ragna didn't even notice the reactions around him. He clenched his teeth fiercely, as if grinding them, and tightened his hands into fists so hard they seemed about to break, desperately trying to contain the urge to lash out at random.

The image of what he had seen in the Kaka village earlier was stuck in Ragna's head and wouldn't leave.

Noel's chest peeking out from the large tear in her clothes. The engraving of spreading wings and the number twelve on her white skin.

(Twelve... twelve. That's definitely a Prime Field number. The previous Prime Fields had them too.)

The Nu he had destroyed underground in Kagutsuchi was number thirteen. The number thirteen was drawn on the chest of her combat bodysuit in the same design as the one on Noel's chest, and if she was the same as the Prime Fields Ragna had destroyed so far, the same mark should have been engraved on her bare skin as well.

(So what? Is she, is Noel also a Prime Field? Just like the dolls I've been destroying, like Nu...)

If that was the case, it made perfect sense that she looked so much like his younger sister, Saya.

Prime Fields were created based on Saya, who had been taken away from the church. Therefore, all Prime Fields made from Saya had the same face as Saya.

When he first saw Noel's face, he was surprised. She looked too similar to be just a look-alike. But maybe it was because she had the same golden hair as his sister. Maybe it was because she had the same green eyes.

Maybe it was because she was a crybaby like his sister, weak-willed, clumsy, and someone who couldn't do anything without help.

Thinking that, believing that, he had convinced himself that she was a human named Noel Vermillion.

(What an idiot I was. There's no way such a convenient story could be true. She looked that similar. I should've suspected something right away, no matter how we encountered each other!)

He had simply been turning a blind eye to the possibility he didn't want to see. And yet, when it was thrust right in front of him, he couldn't think calmly or rationally. He had left Noel's side as if running away, and now he was walking around aimlessly like a lost dog.

"Damn it!" Roaring, Ragna punched something nearby. He didn't even register what he had punched. Probably a wooden wall or a box, something like that. He could barely hear the loud cracking sound. But his feelings didn't clear up at all.

(Why...? Why did I...)

The anger that had nowhere to go was just boiling inside him, and it felt like it was festering him from the inside out with its heat.

(Why didn't I kill her? She's a Prime Field. And yet...)

He should have killed her. No, he should have destroyed her.

All the Prime Fields in this world, which were essentially clones of Saya, should be destroyed. That was supposed to be the reason why Ragna had been wandering around the world, attacking branches of the NOL.

He felt like he had given up on himself. There was a sense of powerlessness, a sense of emptiness, and feelings of that sort kept washing over him, and all he could do was roar to drive them away. He was hopelessly stupid.

(It hurts...)

It was probably because he had been rampaging all the way here. Injuries were throbbing all over his body. But thanks to that doctor named Litchi, or thanks to the Azure Grimoire, his body was surprisingly free of pain, considering he had been on the verge of death.

He repeatedly clenched and opened his left hand, which was his own arm. He could wield a sword well enough now.

He wanted to vent this frustrating feeling on something. Otherwise, he felt like he would just keep thinking unnecessary things and get dizzy.

Come to think of it, was that man still in Kagutsuchi?

Remembering, Ragna looked up, gazing at the upper levels. Beyond the thick roof covering the sky, far above.

Could he be somewhere in the upper layers, where the beautiful buildings lined up, somewhere related to the NOL? That man in the black suit... Hazama, no, Yuuki Terumi.

It wasn't the pain of his injuries, but his right shoulder throbbed. The right arm that had once been cut off.

Ah, yes, with this feeling, the impatience and restlessness from earlier subsided, and a sense of relief came over him.

He hated him. He wanted to kill him. Any gruesome method, any short-sighted method was fine. Anything was fine, as long as he could take that man down. The stagnant hatred now gave Ragna relief.

Besides, if he could just kill Terumi, then Noel and Prime Fields and all that wouldn't matter anymore. After all, the origin of Ragna's negative emotions, no matter how he traced them back, always led to Yuuki Terumi.

"First, I need to find his location..." Muttering aloud as if to convince himself, Ragna started walking again. But the moment he did, he stepped on something. "...Hmm?"

Soft. Somehow, it didn't feel like something he should step on. To put it another way... a crushed human, perhaps.

Lifting the foot he had stepped on, Ragna cautiously lowered his gaze to his feet.

"Whoa!"

What was there was a bundle of rags. To be precise, a human covered in cloth from head to toe. Lying face down on the ground, a white arm extended from under the cloth. Something quite long was wrapped around their back, wrapped tightly in similarly filthy cloth.

Judging from the size of the bulging torso, and the appearance of the arm stretched out on the ground... it was a child.

(Did they collapse?)

Judging from the feeling when he stepped on them, they didn't seem to be dead. Should he take them to a doctor? But when it came to doctors in Orient Town, Ragna only knew Litchi. If he met Litchi, he would inevitably get involved with Noel again. More than anything, he didn't want to lend a hand to a child collapsed and covered in rags.

"...I'll pretend I didn't see it."

That's right, right now, Yuuki Terumi was more important than some rags. He didn't have time to deal with anything else, and he had no intention of doing so.

But the moment Ragna decided to ignore them and took a step, the arm that had been lying lifelessly suddenly shot up and grabbed his ankle with surprising force.

"Aaah!" He let out an involuntary scream. Ragna jumped up in surprise with an awkwardness that even he noticed, desperately hoping that nobody around had seen his reaction, and then cautiously checked his feet again.

The person who had collapsed earlier tightly gripped Ragna's ankle with a strength that didn't seem to match their small hand. The cloth shifted as they stirred, and slowly, they raised their head.

"Oh..." From under the low hood, a mouth that was barely visible let out a strained voice. They looked up at Ragna as if pleading.

"My stomach... it's empty..." They said.

He felt like he had seen this scene just a few days ago.

A table with a red cloth, shrimp with mayonnaise, fried fish with sauce, stir-fried vegetables, meat buns with minced vegetables, and all kinds of gyoza, grilled and steamed, and a large steamed bun...

Ragna, sitting at a corner table in a restaurant he had entered simply because it was cheap, sighed in exasperation as he looked at the large amount of food spread out before him.

"...Why does it always end up like this?"

Engrossed in the food covering the table, a small figure sitting across from Ragna, the contents of the cloth that had collapsed earlier, was reaching out and shoveling food into their mouth at an incredible pace.

Even though they were inside the restaurant, they still wore the sack-like cloak and the long, thin package on their back, and they just kept moving their hands and mouth.

Now that they were eating in front of him, he could see a little of the face under the baggy hood that was pulled down low. They were a child with fair, white skin, surprisingly clean despite being covered in dirty rags. The weak voice that had stopped Ragna earlier and its feebleness were nowhere to be heard in the voice that had ordered with a roaring intensity. It was probably a girl.

She was quite short, even shorter than Carl Clover, the vigilante child he had met in the middle layer the other day.

Why was such a child wandering around Orient Town alone?

More than that, what caught his attention was the long, thin package the child was carrying on her back. He felt an eerie presence coming from that wrapped-up package.

"Enough with the eating already, introduce yourself. And why were you collapsed in a place like that in the first place?" Having learned from his previous meal with Taokaka, Ragna shoveled down the fried rice he had secured for himself and asked, grumbling.

He didn't want to get involved in trouble. But since he had ended up getting involved anyway, he deserved to hear an explanation.

He was the one who was going to pay for the meal at this restaurant. Fortunately, at least the fried rice he had ordered was undeniably delicious. The aroma of the charred garlic and the fat

from the diced roasted pork mixed in was fragrant, and it resonated deeply with his post-illness hunger.

The small glutton across from him, who was stuffing a meat bun into their mouth, looked up at Ragna's voice and glared sharply at him from under the deep hood.

"Idiot!"

"...Huh?!"

It was an unexpected, direct insult. It was a completely different attitude from the weak one she had shown when she stopped him outside earlier. A moment later, Ragna slammed his hand on the table and glared back, along with a shout.

It was the same glare that had made the passing child cry earlier. But the girl wrapped in cloth didn't seem to notice at all, and instead became even more confrontational, scattering pieces of meat bun.

"Idiot, moron, slowpoke, pervert! Spiky-haired lolicon bastard!"

"Who's a lolicon? You... do you even know who you're getting your food from?!" Ragna's fist trembled on the table. He couldn't help but think it was ridiculous to get so worked up over a child, but still, he was irritated.

"Stop it, Luna... that guy's angry, you know?" Suddenly, a voice completely different from the girl's previous demeanor spoke, as if talking to herself. This time, it was a slightly timid voice, frightened and hesitant, with the same tone as the one he had heard outside earlier.

At that voice, the girl herself changed her tone again and replied with a haughty attitude.

"Let him get angry, Sena. There's no way this spiky-haired guy can beat Luna-sama, even if he gets angry."

"Even if you say that, you never know, right? He looks scary... he might even bite you..."

"Hmph, try it if you can! I'll turn the tables on you! Luna is strong. I won't lose to that lolicon bastard."

"I told you, I'm not a lolicon!" Unable to stay silent any longer, Ragna interrupted with a shout. But the girl changed her tone again and whispered to herself.

"See, that's what happens when you say unnecessary things... Looks like it hit a nerve? You shouldn't tell the truth."

"Don't you join in too!!! No... wait. Hold on a second." He let out another snarl, baring his pointed canines, and then Ragna took a deep breath, desperately trying to calm himself down. He told himself to be calm. Now wasn't the time to get hung up on everything this kid said.

"You guys, what are your names?" Ragna asked, addressing both of them. At those words, one of them made a small "oh" sound. It was as if they were impressed.

"...I heard you were a clumsy person, but you're surprisingly sharp, aren't you? Ragna the Bloodedge-san." Called by name with a smug smile in their voice, Ragna raised an eyebrow. He felt like he had been lightly teased.

But that made sense. For a child like this to be wandering around Orient Town in such attire, and even collapsed, it would be unnatural if they didn't know Ragna's name or background. In fact, it was more natural for them to be somewhat dangerous.

"...Anyone would know after that one-person show you put on." Ragna replied bitterly to Sena, the relatively rational and subtly sarcastic voice. Compared to the other's very obvious personality, this one seemed a bit cynical.

After gathering up and eating the remaining fried rice, Ragna added his main point as if as an afterthought.

"Besides, your presence didn't feel like it was just one person."

This girl had been strange all along. Normally, humans have one soul inhabiting one body. But with this girl, he had sensed multiple presences.

He understood as soon as the previous conversation started.

One was haughty and gluttonous, a sassy and sharp-tongued brat.

The other was quiet and withdrawn, but still a sharp-tongued brat.

Two souls were taking turns using one body to talk.

Satisfied with Ragna's reply, Sena, the one who had called Ragna a lolicon by piggybacking on the other, bowed slightly, showing respect.

"Well then, let me introduce myself again... Nice to meet you. My name is Sena. The other one is... Luna, say hello."

"No way. Why should Luna say hello to someone like him? Ugh, my food's going to taste bad."

Saying that, the girl called Luna devoured the stir-fried noodles at an incredible pace. Noodles dripped from the corners of her mouth as she chewed, her cheeks puffed out like rubber. It was Sena who somehow managed to swallow, choking on the force of it.

"Geez, you're like a beast, you know? Jubei-sama might come out if you do that?" At Sena's worried words, Ragna's ears perked up.

"Jubei? Are you two acquaintances of my master?" Leaning slightly over the table, Ragna stuck his neck out and asked. If they were related to Jubei, his attitude would change in various ways. He even held a faint hope that he might be able to bill them for the meal later.

But as soon as Ragna mentioned Jubei's name, Luna, who had been ignoring him and stuffing her face with fried fish, slammed her chopsticks on the table and yelled in a high-pitched voice, full of rage.

"It's none of your business, pervert! Don't breathe on me, you lolicon bastard!"

"What did you say!? And stop calling me a lolicon!"

"Blegh! The fact that you keep denying it makes you even more suspicious, you pervert!"

"You little..."

He shouldn't have made such a rash judgment, thinking they were just kids.

Putting all his strength into his clenched fist and pressing it against the table, Ragna resisted the urge to punch them, and deeply regretted his mistake.

When she said she was hungry on the main street, Ragna had tried to ignore her again. He had no money, no reason to help her. In fact, he was in no position to do so. He had tried to leave the scene with all his might.

But this ragged girl didn't give up so easily.

Clinging to Ragna's leg as he tried to shake her off, she sat down and started crying. And she cried, "I'm hungry... I'm so hungry I can't move... Oh, I guess I'll just starve to death like this... I wanted to eat a warm meal until I was full one last time... If only this young man wasn't a demon, a devil, a heartless person who could ignore a starving child..."

On a busy street, there was a rough-looking man standing alone. At his feet was a child sitting and crying about being hungry. The whispers of passersby he heard in just over ten seconds made him realize with heart-breaking clarity how that scene must have looked to those around him.

As a result, Ragna had been manipulated by this child's scheme and was now sitting at the same table with her.

Looking back now, it was probably Sena who had grabbed Ragna's leg at that time and, on top of that, carried out the despicable crying act. He had been completely played.

Before he knew it, all the food that had been on the table had been neatly finished, and Luna, judging from her attitude, was leaning back in her chair, looking satisfied as she rubbed her stomach. A smudge of steamed bun clung to her carelessly relaxed mouth.

"Was it good?" Ragna asked, propping his chin on his hand and looking at the bill.

"It was alright." It was Luna, as expected. He got a sassy reply.

She had cleaned up quite nicely. Empty plates were scattered all over the table. Not even a scrap of meat was left. Ragna looked at it sideways in amazement.

"So what's the name of the third one?" Ragna put down the bill and turned to the girl.

He had been curious ever since he realized that Luna and Sena, two souls, were inside this girl. If he were just counting presences, there were three, not two.

Considering the state of the two who could take turns speaking, there should have been another person, like Luna and the other, who could use this body to speak.

But Luna and Sena both looked blank, not replying and stopping their movements. For just two seconds.

The girl's body, which had been slumped in her seat, straightened up in a very natural gesture, and she sat up elegantly.

"To think you even saw through me... You really are Ragna the Bloodedge, aren't you?" The voice that began to speak was different from the two before. Luna and Sena were children who matched their appearance, but the third one's tone and demeanor were more mature. Moreover, they hinted at someone with a decent education.

Clasping her small hands together on her lap as if in prayer, the third one tilted her head in a leisurely and gentle manner.

"Hello. My name is Trinity Glassfille."

"Trinity?" It was a name he had never heard before.

Smiling at the frowning Ragna, who was frowning, the slightly more mature-looking girl who called herself Trinity placed her hand on her chest. When she did, even Luna and Sena's appearance, which had looked like they were only about ten years old, seemed to age up a few years. It was strange.

"I've always wanted to meet you. But I don't have much time to keep those two under control and be out here... So I'll be brief." Lowering her gaze once, Trinity looked at Ragna again. Her light green eyes held a strong, serious light amidst their calm, and she looked straight at him as if pleading. "Ragna... you must not fight Yuuki Terumi. In your current state, you will never be able to defeat him."

Can't, she said. The "Trinity" in the form of a child stated it clearly.

At those words, Ragna could only furrow his brow slightly. It would be easy to dismiss it as nonsense. But there was a heavy depth in this woman's tone, as if she knew something Ragna didn't. So after a few beats, he asked.

"How do you know that? If you have a reason, let me hear it. Otherwise, telling me to just accept it is ridiculous."

It wasn't like he was being mocked or made fun of. He could tell that from her demeanor. Even so, he didn't like what she had said, and his face and tone became irritated.

"That is..." Trinity was about to say something, but her words were cut off.

Suddenly, a ring of light appeared right next to the seats where Ragna and the others were sitting. A pattern like a magic circle drew itself in the air and rotated, and a crackling sound like discharging electricity could be heard coming from the ring.

The sound gradually, steadily increased.

"Space-time transfer... complete... activation... activation... activation..."

It teleported the figure of a single girl to the spot.

Ragna was speechless at the sight.

A small, delicate body, a familiar height. Long hair swaying on her back was golden, tied in a loose braid. Her whole body was covered in a bodysuit designed for functionality, and her feet, which landed nimbly on her toes, were not human silhouettes but the wide, thick shape of a sword.

Eight sword-like wings floated on her back.

And the number "eleven" was inscribed on the girl's chest.

Ragna kicked back his chair and stood up, grabbing the sword that had been leaning beside him.

"A Prime Field...!?"

But why would she appear in a restaurant in Orient Town of all places?

While Ragna was still confused but on guard, the number eleven girl turned around with stiff movements.

With a headgear that covered most of her face, a light resembling red eyes flickered several times.

The Prime Field's lips moved slightly, whispering something. It was a voice just barely audible to Ragna, and he wasn't even sure if what he had heard was correct. But now she probably was...

—Ragna.

It sounded like she had said that.

"You..."

Why on earth are you here?

Interrupting Ragna's words, who was about to ask, the girl with the number eleven extended her hand forward, and this time she opened her mouth clearly.

"...Command verified... Switching to combat mode."

"What...?"

Announcing in a mechanical, inorganic voice, the unfamiliar Prime Field girl deployed the eight swords that had been following her back to the left and right, like spreading wings, and pointed their tips at Ragna.

January 3, 2200 - 17:00

The view from the rooftop, the very pinnacle of the Novus Orbis Librarium's Kagutsuchi branch, which towered at the center and apex of Kagutsuchi, was quite spectacular.

In the western sky, the sun was just about to set. The burning orange light illuminated the world seen from above, and the man standing on the rooftop, as if to scorch them. But that light was only for a fleeting moment. As if chased away by the impatient presence of night, the setting sun weakened its intensity over the cities.

The day, which had shone in white, would soon fade to red, be painted over by the deep blue of night, and yield the sky to the white moonlight.

Then what about the distorted moon?

If it were to bring down the sun, and bring down the moon as well, what would rise in the sky next?

Perhaps it would be a completely new world, one that no one had ever seen before.

"...Well, it doesn't really matter, does it?" Muttering to himself, the man on the rooftop shifted his gaze from the sunset to the structure towering behind him.

This, too, was spectacular in its own way. A circular rooftop with a wide, flat floor and no railings. At its far end, a black, gigantic stone monument stood as if enthroned. Countless blue lines ran across the surface of the monument, pulsing quietly and slowly, like the breathing of a sleeping maiden. The flawless surface was as smooth as if it were a work of art.

"Finally complete, isn't it?" Recalling the hardships he had endured, the man looked up at the gigantic black slab and spoke with deep emotion, as if on the verge of tears.

All that was left was to create using this. The truly necessary, truly desired finished product.

The man on the rooftop trembled. Not with sobs, but with a smile of delight.

"Kukuku... Kukukuku, well then, it's about time I showed you."

The lies of this world. The ugliness of what you've believed in.

"The truth called despair! Hyahahaha!"

Afterword

Thank you for picking up this book. I am Mako Komao, the author.

First, let me introduce myself. This book, "BLAZBLUE CONTINUUM SHIFT," is a novelization of the 2D fighting game title released by Arc System Works Co., Ltd.

Furthermore, "C S," which is both the title of this book and the game, is a sequel that continues the story from the previous work, "CALAMITY TRIGGER."

The game software, as well as the novelization of "CT," are already available, so if you happen to pick up this book and find it interesting, I would be very happy if you could enjoy that one as well.

Furthermore, the past arc, "Phase 0" and "Phase Shift 1-4," are also available as novelizations, so please check them out if you like!

By the way, the latest installment of the game software, "CHRONOPHANTASMA," is currently running in arcades. The home console version will also be released on October 24, 2013!

The "BLAZBLUE" series has an easy mode, so even people who have never played it before can enjoy it. And above all, the thick story mode, which couldn't be fully written in the novelization, is a highlight, so please give it a try! I also helped with part of the scenario.

Also, I have more good news! In the fall of 2013, "BLAZBLUE" was made into a TV anime! Ragna, Noel, and Jin will be moving and talking! Congratulations!!

Of course, at the time of writing this afterword, the anime broadcast hasn't started yet, and the information about it is still limited, but I'm really looking forward to it.

Perhaps some of you reading this may have already finished watching the anime broadcast. If so, please try to find the Blu-ray or something. I'm sure it's interesting!

It doesn't matter where you start or when. Let's enjoy "BLAZBLUE" together!

...Okay. Good. I've said pretty much everything I wanted to say, so now for a loose, personal afterword.

First of all, hooray for the "CS" novelization! It would have been unthinkable to have "CT" but not "CS," right? It's finally been novelized, yay!

While I'm full of joy, to be honest... it was tough. This time, I received the plot from Mori-san, so it wasn't that I struggled with creating the story... but I faced the complexity that "CS" contained and experienced something like a swollen stomach several times.

It wasn't just the story setting, but more than anything, I was often troubled by the various feelings of the characters, and it became an opportunity for me to reconsider the characters of "BLAZBLUE."

"CS" is a story where the world begins to move significantly. Perhaps because of that, each character also starts to move significantly and change. I'm impressed, now more than ever, by how immense the opening of the world is.

It felt like I was drowning, but even so, I poured all my strength into depicting "CS," and here I present the first volume to you.

How does it appear to those of you who have read it? I would be happy if you enjoyed it, and if you could feel the world of "BLAZBLUE" a little closer.

As the title suggests, and as those of you who have read to the end will naturally think, this is "Volume 1." So, of course, there is a "Volume 2." There are still characters who haven't appeared in Volume 1, and characters who will start to rampage in earnest. I think I can deliver a lot, so please continue to accompany me in Volume 2 as well.

I will do my best to meet your expectations, struggling with all my might while drowning.

Well... thank you for reading this far.

From here, I would like to express my gratitude to everyone involved.

First of all, to my editor... I feel like I've run out of words of apology, but once again, I'm sorry for all the trouble I caused. Thank you so much for your help. I can't thank you enough.

To Sugiyama-san, who drew the illustrations. Thank you so much for providing so many illustrations despite the delay in my manuscript. I haven't seen the illustrations for this volume yet, but I'm really looking forward to them. I was struck by the cuteness of the young Ragna and the others in the frontispiece of "CT Volume 1," and it's still etched in my mind. I love it.

To Mori-san, the producer and original author. I'm sorry for causing you trouble with the delay in the manuscript and everything else, despite your mountain of work. I'm deeply grateful that you entrusted me with the novelization of the important "BB." I will continue to work hard. Thank you, and I look forward to working with you in the future.

Finally, to you, who are now opening and reading this book, thank you more than anyone else. This book was born thanks to everyone's love for "BLAZBLUE." I'm very happy to have met you here. I hope to see you in Volume 2 as well.

I'll be waiting for you in the afterword of Volume 2. Until then, please have happy days!

Well then, goodbye.

Mako Komao

"Hello, this is Sugiyama from Arc System Works.
Following Calamity Trigger, I will also be doing the illustrations for Continuum Shift.
Please look forward to the next volume!
Best regards, Yuki Sugiyama"

"Hello, this is Mori from Arc System Works.
BlazBlue has finally moved on to Continuum Shift!
Speaking of Continuum Shift... I'm looking forward to this guy's performance!
Komao-sensei! Please get excited!!"